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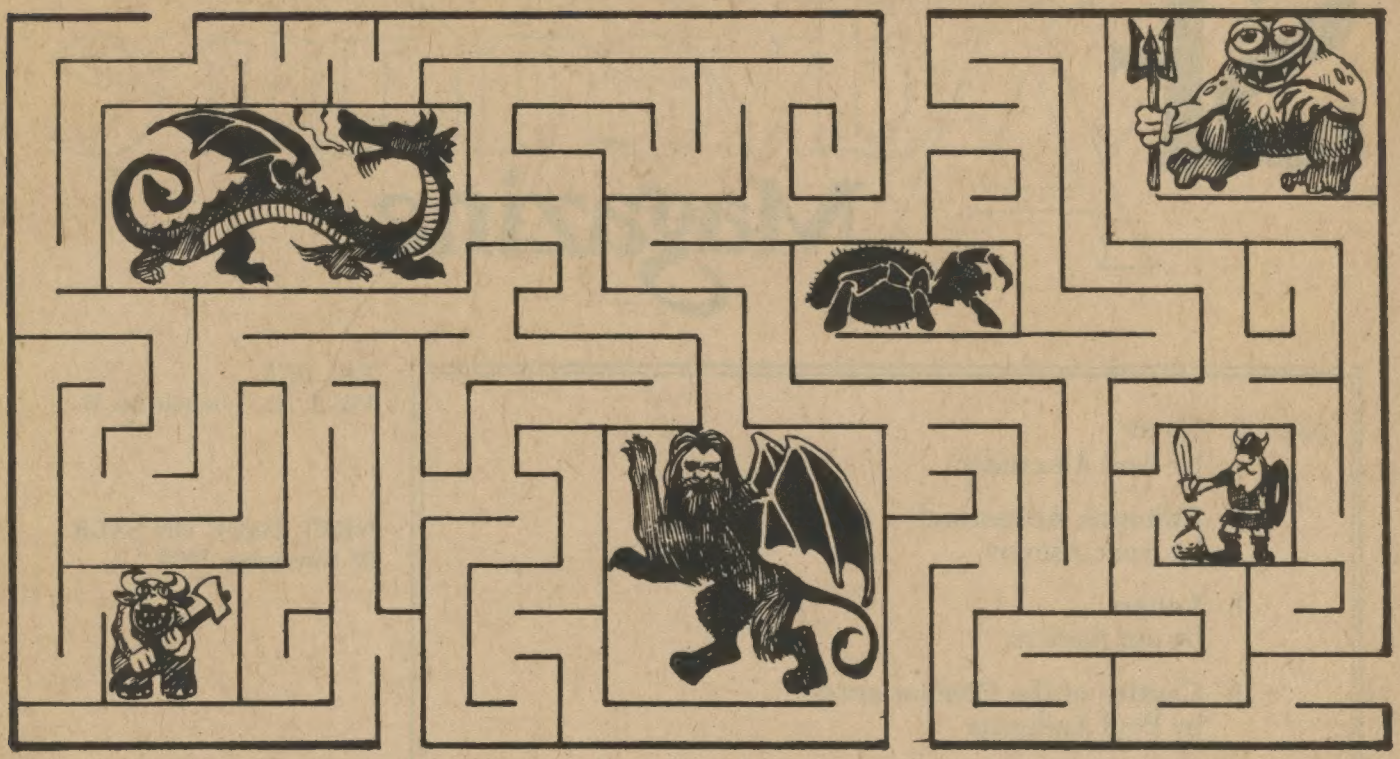

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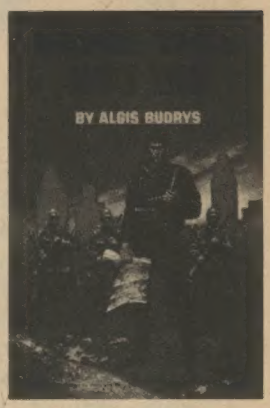

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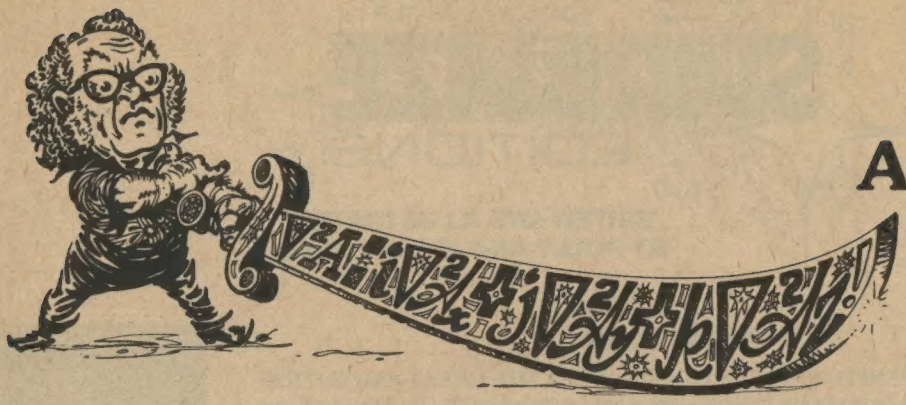

ADVENTURE!

by Isaac Asimov

The adventure story has a long and honorable history.

The history couldn't very well be any longer than it is, since it is hard to believe that the stories spun over the campfires of Stone Age people were anything but adventure stories of marvellous hunts and of the cracking of skulls of enemies.

The earliest myths we gather from the various primitive cultures on Earth tell of the daring adventures of the gods and of the battles among them. Even the God of the Bible may have had such a history. There are traces in the Bible of primitive tales recounting how the creation of an ordered universe followed only after a battle to the death with the forces of chaos.

In Psalm 74, we may have an echo of that early cosmic battle: "Thou didst divide the sea by thy strength; thou brakest the heads of the dragons in the waters. Thou brakest the heads of leviathan in pieces."

Nor could the history of the adventure story be any more honorable than it is.

The oldest intact works of fiction in Western literature are Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and what are they but adventure stories? The former is a rousing war story, the latter a thrilling travel tale.

Don't get me wrong. I don't say that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are *just* adventure stories. Critics have found a great deal more to them than that. —Still, it is the adventure aspect of each that spelled survival and popularity, even today.

The most popular bits in the *Iliad* have always been the battle scenes—especially the climactic duel between Hector and Achilles, with the audience torn apart because Homer's genius led him to divide audience sympathies almost equally between the two heroes.

And the most popular bits in the *Odyssey* are the macabre adventures that Odysseus recounts at the court of the Phaeacians, particularly that episode in the cave of Polyphemus, the man-eating, ogrish Cyclops.

Ever since Homer, adventure tales have fascinated human beings and have therefore endured. The medieval tales of King Arthur—the fantasies of the Arabian Nights—the blood and thunder of Shakespeare.

Blood and thunder? Yes, indeed. Shakespeare may be the standard for all that is lofty in literature—but the fact is he wrote for the popular taste and was criticized for that both in his time and afterward. He had fighting and hacking all over the place. In King Lear, one of the characters has his eyes gouged out right on stage; and in Titus Andronicus, we have rape, mutilation, and cannibalism. Science fiction is no stranger to the adventure story. Verne's stories were primarily tales of high adventure, however careful he might have been to include bits of justifying science lectures.

And, of course, once the science fiction magazines appeared on the scene, adventure reigned supreme for decades. Hugo Gernsback used to argue that science fiction was an educational force; and so it is in my opinion, but only secondarily. What the readers wanted was adventure in the first place and that's what they got.

Although first *Amazing Stories* and then *Wonder Stories* tried, unsuccessfully, to maintain a certain loftiness, making use of footnotes, science quizzes, and so on, they didn't stay on top of the heap. In 1930 there appeared *Astounding Stories,* which was unabashedly adventure-oriented, and which quickly took over the leadership of the field.

In 1937, John Campbell became editor of *Astounding Stories,* changed its name to *Astounding Science Fiction,* and moved it away from adventure; but by that time *Wonder Stories* had become *Thrilling Wonder Stories* and had moved toward adventure.

In 1939, there came a science fiction magazine boom, and new magazines of all kinds suddenly made their appearance on the newsstand. In December 1939, *Planet Stories* appeared. It was, in some ways, the best of the adventure science fiction magazines of its time.

But if there are science fiction magazine booms, there are also science fiction magazine busts; and—all too often—the higher the boom, the deeper the bust. A particularly intense boom came in the early 1950s; and in the particularly-intense bust that followed, both *Thrilling Wonder*

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Stories and *Planet Stories* discontinued publication in 1955.

With that, somehow, adventure science fiction dwindled. The magazines that survived the vicissitudes of the time, such as *Analog*, *F & SF*, and *Galaxy* did not concentrate on adventure primarily. Nor does the new, but already clearly successful, *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*.

Why is this?

For one thing, the science fiction readership has changed. Back in the 1920s and 1930s, science fiction readers were almost universally under eighteen, and the magazines were geared to them.

Many youngsters dropped out of science fiction as they grew older, but not all did; and the median age of the readership has risen speedily. Increasingly after World War II, the growing percentage of older readers influenced the field so that science fiction had to mature as well.

Secondly, not only were there more older readers but there were fewer younger ones, as first comic magazines and then television came along to compete for the allegiance of the young.

And as an accident of history, false definitions have been made. "Adventure" has come to mean "pulp" and both have come to mean "bad writing."

The early magazines between the two World Wars were called "pulp" because of the paper they used. Those pulp magazines needed many stories and paid low rates so they couldn't be too choosy in what they accepted. Writers had to write many stories to meet the demand and to make a living.

Hurried writing is usually lurid and clumsy, and those were the characteristics that left their mark on pulp fiction. Perhaps 90 percent of pulp writing was like that; but then, as Ted Sturgeon said, 90 percent of everything is bad.

But that still leaves 10 percent that is good, and well-written adventure can be very effective indeed.

Then, too, "adventure" has come to mean "kids", because the early magazines were youngster-oriented. Surely, though, it doesn't take much thought to see that well-written adventure stories can be enjoyed by anyone of any age.

It is with that thought in mind that *Asimov's SF Adventure Magazine* is being brought out.

We want to fill the void left by the demise of magazines such as *Planet Stories*. We want to meet the needs of at least some of the vast number who discovered *Star Wars* in the movies, who enjoyed it, and who are ready to look for something of the same sort, or better, in print.

Asimov's SF Adventure Magazine is dedicated to adventure or it wouldn't bear the name it does, but not to adventure at any cost. As far as we can, it is our intention to supply well-written adventure science fiction by authors who are not ignorant of science. Our stories will have action, but not at the expense of science or of writing skill.

Can we do it?

It would be foolish to guarantee success. These are precarious times for magazines generally, and the tight-rope is difficult to walk.

We must hope that our distribution is sufficiently efficient, that we can find the writers who will supply the material we need, and that we discover that our estimate of readership is reasonably accurate.

What we know we have are a reliable publisher, an experienced staff, and a great deal of determination.

So we'll start with this first issue and see if we can't use it to convince enough of you that "adventure" and "good" can be adjectives that are not at war with each other, that "adventure" and "intelligent" are adjectives that can be applied to the same story, that "adventure" and "let's-have-more" can reinforce each other and lead to success.

LETTERS

We asked Ron Goulart to tell us a little about what he's been up to lately . . .

George:

In answer to your query. Yes, I am writing a new science fiction comic strip and I'd be happy to tell you and your readers something about it.

Gil Kane (of Marvel fame) is the artist and the strip is called STAR HAWKS. It started running last October and we're in about 100 newspapers in the United States, Canada and the world at large — in such cities as New York, Philadelphia, Detroit, Washington, Paris, Rome, Manila, Mexico City and Buenos Aires. Not only is STAR HAWKS the first new SF strip to come along in over a decade, it's also the largest. We're double size (what you call a 2-tier strip) and this means both much more visual impact and much more work for Kane.

STAR HAWKS takes place in the same universe I've used in most of my space adventure novels, namely the Barnum System of planets. Stories focus on the adventures of a team of Interplan Law Service agents (nicknamed Star Hawks for the sake of a socko title) who patrol a wild and restless planet. We also have a full cast of robots, cyborgs, creatures, androids and damsels in distress. Not to mention a galactic conspiracy now and then.

Although I've been a comics fan ever since, at about age 2, I discovered that the Sunday funnies were more colorful than the rest of the paper, I find the actual writing of strip continuity is a tricky business. About now, when I've been at it for more than a half year, I think I'm starting to figure out how it's done. The most important thing is the pacing, deciding on how much of your story you tell each day. You also have to realize your readers, for the most part anyway, aren't sav-

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ing your stuff in scrapbooks, and so you can't allude to something which happened three weeks earlier and expect instant recognition. Each strip is a sort of slice of the story and really only connects with the dailies immediately before and after it.

So far nobody at our syndicate (which is Newspaper Enterprise Association, better known as NEA) has thrown away any of my copy for being too laden with SF terms and gimmicks. This is partly due to the fact I'm not the most hardcore writer in the field, but more because readers today are much more aware of the basic premises and props of science fiction.

Check back with me in another year or so and I'll probably be better able to tell you how exactly to go about writing science fiction for a mainstream audience.

Best,

Ron Goulart

In the grand old tradition of the SF letter columns, Lin Carter has reviewed our previous issue — and never mind that this issue is our first . . . !

Dear Ed:

Well, the latest ish of *AsfA* came slithering into my favorite newsstand, and I barely managed to rescue a copy before the panic-maddened newsstand-owner beat it to death with an empty Pepsi bottle. Of course, once I got a good look at the cover, I understood what had unnerved the poor fellow so. (Tell me, Ed, all kidding aside, do you actually . . . *look* . . . at those covers, or just clap 'em on quick, to spare the eyes?)

Now that the latest ish has been devoured with relish, not to mention a dab or two of mustard, I am ready to deliver my monthly report.

(1) "Slithering Slime-Pits of Cygnus Six," your lead novel, was simply breath-taking in its narrative simplicity, emotional poignancy, and artistic delicacy of touch and nuance. To put it into words of one syllable (so you and most of your writers will be able to understand it), this is the finest yarn Alonzo Aargh has given you since that deathless classic, "Glibbering Ghouls of Galaxy Nine," in the issue before. Find out whatever it is Alonzo has been drinking, and order him another case of it, willya?

(2) "Hurtling Hell-Hordes of Hermes," the novelette in the ish, was another gem. I have always adored the subtle literary skills of Norman Nerd since I first encountered them in the brilliant pages of "Vermilion Virgins of Vortex Z." Glad to see he's up to snuff.

(3) As usual, your monthly clutch of short-stories packed all the punch of a handful of clammy, day-old spaghetti, and were just about as appetizing. Nonetheless, I have to admit that "Purple Princess of Pluto" was a genuine masterpiece, and "Giggling Gargoyles of Ganymede" contained brilliant concepts, dazzling ingenuity of plot, and prose passages of utter magnificence. Please pass along my compliments to the authors, Melvin Muck and F. Van Wyck Schlepper.

The illos this ish certainly left much to be desired. If Sam Slush ever learns how to draw anatomy, his people may begin to look less like they were carved out of mouldy linoleum. And tell him, for the love o' Great Ghu, that Mars does not, repeat *not*, have nine moons in its sky. (Or were they just splotches from the rot-gut booze he was swilling when he scribbled those pix?)

As usual, the letters were just about the best thing in the whole darn mag.

That's all for now, Ed — I still love ya, no matter how hard I hit — and I'll be blasting off for Home Base now. But see ya next ish!

LIN CARTER
the Sage of St. Pete.
(The One, the Only, the Original Sage: Look for the Big Red Letters on the Aura.)

P.S. All kidding aside, George, that's the kind of fan letters we used to write to *Planet Stories* thirty years ago, when we were young and (relatively) innocent. If your new magazine can serve up anywhere near the same kind of adventure, excitement, thrills and action that *Planet* did, you'll have a devoted reader here. Best of luck . . . and keep them rockets blasting!

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CAPTIVE OF THE CENTAURIANESS

by Poul Anderson
illustrated by Alex Schomburg

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The hero is the child of his times, in that his milieu gives him his motives and means. Yet he seizes the world as he finds it and reshapes it as he will; and he remains eternally an enigma to his contemporaries and to the future.

Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the famous but ever strange story of the three whose discoveries and achievements, late in the twenty-third century, set entire races of beings upon wholly new courses. The driving idealism and military genius of Dyann Korlas; the wisdom, mighty, profound, and benign, of Urushkidan; above all, perhaps, the inspired leadership of Tallantyre–these molded history, but we will never truly understand them. The persons who embodied them are still further beyond us. The essential selves of the glorious three will always be mysterious.

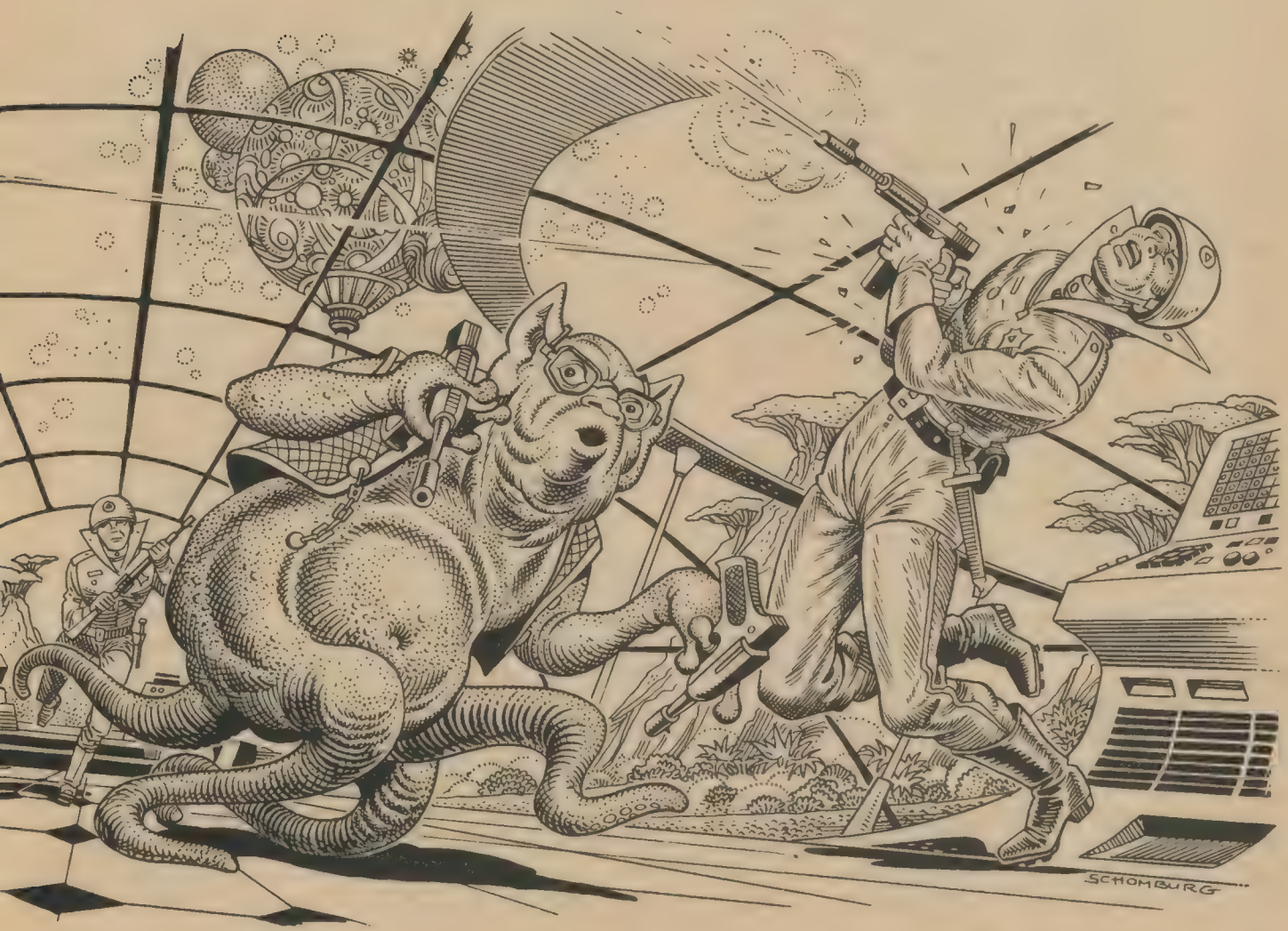
—Vallabhai Rasmussen,
Origins of the Galactic Era

I.

Floodlit, the tender loomed against night, above the swarm of humanity, like a great golden bullet. Ray Tallantyre quickened his steps. By George and dragon both, he'd made it! The flight fron San Francisco to Quito, the nail-gnawing wait for an airbus, the ride to the spaceport, the walk through a terminal building that seemed to stretch on forever—all were outlived and there she was, there the darling stood, ready to carry him up to the *Jovian Queen* and safety.

He kissed his fingers at the craft and shoved rudely through the crowd. He'd already missed the first trip up to the liner, and the thought of standing around till the third was beyond endurance.

"Hey, you."



As the voice fell on his ears, a hand did on his arm. Ray could have sworn he felt his heart slam against his teeth and his spine fall out of his trousers. Somehow he turned around. A large man was comparing his thin features with a photograph held in the unoccupied paw. "Yes, it's you, all right," this person said. "Come along, Tallantyre."

"*¡Me llama Garcia!*" the fugitive gibbered. "*No hablo inglés.*"

"I said come along," the detective answered. "We figured you'd try to leave Earth. This way."

Sometimes desperation breeds inspiration. Ray's own free hand crammed the fellow's hat down over his eyes. Wrenching loose, he bolted for the gangramp. En route, he upset a corpulent lady. A volley of Latin imprecations pursued him. Shoving aside another passenger, he sped up the incline—and bounced off the wall which was a Jovian officer.

"Your ticket and passport, please," said that man. He was a tall, muscular blond, crisply white-uniformed, who regarded the new arrival with the thinly veiled contempt of a true Confed for the lesser breeds of life.

Ray shoved the documents at him, meanwhile staring backward. The detective had gotten entangled with the lady, who was beating him around the head with her purse and volubly cursing him. Agonizingly deliberate, the Jovian scanned the engineer's papers, checked them against a list, and waved him on.

The detective won free, followed, and struck the same immovable barrier. "Your ticket and passport, please," said the ship's representative.

"That man's under arrest," panted the detective. "Let me by."

"Your ticket and passport, please."

"I tell you I'm an officer of the law and I have a warrant for that man. Let me by!"

"Proper authorization may be obtained at the security center," said the immovable barrier. The detective tried to rush, encountered a bit of expert judo, and tumbled back into a line of passengers who also grew indignant with him. Every able-bodied Jovian was a military reservist.

"Proper authority may be obtained at the security center," the gatekeeper repeated. To the next person: "Your ticket and passport, please."

In the airlock chamber, Ray Tallantyre dashed the sweat off his brow and permitted himself a laugh. By the time his pursuer had gone through all the red tape, he himself would be on the space liner. Before one of his own country's secret police, the ship's officer would have quailed. However, this was Earth; and the Confeds loved to bait agents of the Terrestrial government; and there was no better way than by putting the victims through channels. Where it came to devising these, the bureaucracy of the Confederated Satellites of Jupiter was beyond compare.

Being in orbit, the vessel counted as Jovian territory; and Ray's alleged offense did not rate extradition.

He went on inside, was shown to a seat, and secured the harness. He was clear! No matter how long, the arm of the Vanbrugh family did not reach as far as he was bound. He could stay till the whole business had blown over. To be sure, he might have difficulty getting a job meanwhile, but he'd worry about that when the time came. *Always did want to see the Jovian System anyway*, he rationalized.

Sighing, he tried to relax: a medium-sized, wiry young man with close-cropped yellow hair and a countenance a little too sharp to be handsome. Likewise, his scarf was overly colorful, his jacket a trifle extravagantly flared.

The last passenger boarded. The lock valves closed. A stewardess went down the aisle handing out cookies which, Ray knew, contained medication to prevent space sickness. She had the full-bodied Caucasoid good looks of the ideal Jovian together with the faintly repellent air of total efficiency. "No, thanks," he said. "I've been out before. Acceleration and free fall don't bother me."

"The cookies are compulsory," she told him, and watched while he ate his. A throbbing went through the vessel as the engine came to life; outside the hull, a warning siren hooted.

He turned to the passenger beside him, obsessed with the idiotic desire for conversation found in most recent escapers from the law or the dentist. "Going home, I see," he remarked.

That person sat tall in the gray Jovian army uniform, colonel's planets on his shoulders and a haberdashery of ribbons across his chest. He looked about forty-five years old, Terrestrial, though his shaven pate made it hard to estimate; Ray gauged by the deep facial creases running down to the craggy jaw. Fixing the Earthling with a glacier-pale eye, he responded: "And you, I see, are leaving home. Two scintillating deductions." Though English was his mother tongue also—the one on which his polyglot ancestors had agreed even before the Symmetrist Revolution laid a single ideology on them—he made it sound as if it had been issued him.

"Um-m-m, uh, well," said Ray and looked elsewhere, his ears ablaze. The Jovian clutched tighter to his side the large briefcase he bore.

Announcements and orders resounded. The spacecraft shivered, howled, and sprang into the sky. Ray let acceleration pressure push him back into the cushions; the seat flattened itself into a couch; he gazed upward through a viewport and saw splendor unfold, stars and stars and stars, blackness well-nigh crowded out of sight by brilliance. His companion declined to recline.

The boost did not take long, then they were on trajectory and the *Jovian Queen* appeared. At first the liner was a mere needle to see, shimmery-blue by the light of the Earth she was orbiting. Soon she was close by, and the sun struck her as she swung clear of the planet's shadow cone, and she became huge and radiant. Despite her weight-giving spin, the tender made smooth contact. Whatever you could say against the Jovians—and some people said quite a bit—they did maintain the best transport in the Solar System. Every national fleet on Earth and most private companies were finding it nearly impossible to compete.

The stewardess directed the passengers through joined airlocks and toward their quarters. She promised that luggage would be delivered "in due course." That reminded Ray that he'd checked in a single tiny suitcase containing little but a few changes of clothing. And his third class ticket meant that he'd have to share a cabin, which it would be ludicrous to call a stateroom, with two others. The decline and fall of the Tallantyre credit account was so depressing a subject that the pseudo-gravity, low though it was, bowed his shoulders; and, forgetting to allow for Coriolis force, he bruised a toe as he rounded a corner in the passage. Well and good to have gotten away from Earth free, he thought; but he'd hit Ganymede damn near broke, and he hadn't really considered as yet how he was going to survive there. This had simply been the sole destination in space for which he could get a ticket at exceedingly short notice. . . .

A number identified the door assigned him. He opened it.

"Put—me—down!"

Ray gaped at the spectacle of a Martian struggling in the clutch of a woman two meters tall.

"Put—me—down!" the Martian spluttered again. He had coiled his limbs snakelike around her arms and torso, and the four thick walking tentacles were formidably strong. She didn't seem to notice, but laughed and shook him a bit.

"I beg your pardon," Ray gasped and backed away.

"You are forgiven," the woman replied in a husky contralto with a lilting accent. She shot out one Martian-encumbered hand, grabbed him by the jacket, and hauled him inside. "You be the yudge, my friend. Is it not yustice that I have the lo'er berth?"

"It is noting of te sort!" screamed the Martian. He fixed the newcomer with round, bulging, indignant yellow eyes. "My position, my eminence, clearly entitle me to ebery consideration, and ten tis hulking monster—"

The Earthling's gaze traveled up and down the woman's form before he said softly, "I think you'd better accept the lady's generous offer. But, uh, I seem to have the wrong cabin."

"Is your name Ray Tallantyre?" she asked.

He pleaded guilty.

"Then you belon vith us. I have asked about the passenyer list. You may have the sofa for sleepin."

"Th-thanks." Ray sat down on it. His knees felt loose.

The Martian gave up the struggle and allowed the woman to place him on the upper bunk. "To tink of it," he squeaked. "Tat I, Urushkidan of Ummunashektaru, should be manhandled by a sabage who does not know a logaritm from an elliptic integral!"

Astounded, Ray stared as if this were the first of the race that he had met in his life. Urushkidan's gray-skinned cupola of a body balanced 120 centimeters tall on the walking tentacles; above them, two slim, three-fingered arms writhed bonelessly on either side of a wide, lipless mouth. Elephantine ears and flat nose supported a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles, his only garb except for a poisonously green vest full of pockets with all kinds of things in them.

"Not *the* Urushkidan?" Ray breathed—the mathematician acclaimed throughout the Solar System as a latter-day Gauss or Einstein.

"Tere is only *one* Urushkidan," the Martian informed him.

For a moment of total irrelevance, Ray's rocking mind wondered how different history might have been if the first probes to Mars hadn't happened to land in two of the Great Barrens—if civilizations upon that world had gone in for agriculture or architecture identifi-

able by instruments in orbit—if, even, the weird biochemistry of the natives had been unable to endure Terrestrial conditions—

A Homeric shout of laughter brought him back to what he must suppose was reality. The woman uttered it where she loomed over him. "Velcome, male Tallantyre," she cried. "You are cute. I think I vill like you. I am Dyann Korlas of Kathantuma." She took his hand in a friendly grip.

He yelped and got it back not quite crushed. "You're one of the Centaurians, then," he said feebly.

"Yes, so you call us."

He found himself regarding her with some pleasure, overwhelming though her presence was. Hitherto he had only seen her kind on television.

Except for the pointed ears, which her braids concealed, she looked human enough externally, albeit not of any stock which had ever evolved on Earth. The similarities extended to all the most interesting areas, he knew. Memories came back to him of scientific arguments he had read as to whether this was mere coincidence or whether form had to follow function that closely on every globe of a given type. There were plenty of internal differences, of course, among them being bone and flesh which were considerably harder and denser than his. Alpha Centauri A III—or Varann, as its most advanced nation had decided to name it after learning from the first Solar expedition that it was a planet—had, among other striking non-resemblances to his world, half again the surface gravity.

Her size reminded him of alienness which went deeper than appearance. Men of her race were smaller and weaker than women. In every known culture, they stayed home and did the housework while their wives conducted public business. In warlike Kathantuma and its neighbor lands, public business usually meant raids on somebody else with the objective of stealing everything that wasn't bolted down.

Nevertheless, this . . . Dyann Korlas . . . was well worth staring at. She was built like a statuesque tigress. Her skin was smooth and golden-hued. Bronze hair coiled heavy around a face which would have inspired an ancient Hellenic sculptor; but exotic touches, such as a slight tilt to the big, storm-gray eyes, made it look not only Classical but sexy. Her outfit consisted of a knee-length tunic, sandals, a form-fitting steel cuirass with twin demonic visages sculptured on the bust, a round helmet decorated with bat-like bronze wings, a belt upholding purse and sheath knife, and a sword which Lancelot might have reckoned just a trifle too heavy.

Ray found his voice: "Are you sure I belong in this cabin? Hasn't somebody made a mistake?"

She grinned. "Oh, you are safe."

He recalled that the titles of aristocrats in her home country translated into expressions like "chief," "district ruler," "warrior," and the like. A few males had accompanied the Centaurian ladies to the Solar System. Arrogantly indifferent to details of ethnology, the Jovians must have assumed from her honorific, whatever it was—doubtless written down on her behalf by some Extraterrestrial Secretariat underling told off to assist these visitors—that she was among those males.

Well, why should Ray Tallantyre disabuse the ship's officers? The overworked third-class steward wasn't likely to care, or perhaps even notice. Not that the Earthling expected any action with his cabin mate, especially in Urushkidan's presence. Indeed, the idea was somewhat terrifying. However, from time to time the view in here ought to get quite nice. They had no nudity taboo in Kathantuma.

Reminded of the Martian and his manners, Ray glanced toward the upper berth. Urushkidan was morosely stuffing a big-bowled pipe. Tobacco-smoking was a vice on which his race had eagerly seized; they didn't exactly breathe, but by the bellows-and-membrane organ which they also used to form human speech, they could keep the fire going. They usually described the sensation as "tinglesome."

"Uh, sir, I'd like to say I know of your work," the human ventured. "In fact, since I am—was—a nucleonic engineer, I can appreciate what it means."

The Martian inflated his body, his way of smiling or preening. "Doubtless you habe grasped it quite well," he replied graciously. "As well as any Eartling could, which is, of course, saying bery little."

"But if I may ask, uh, what are you doing here?"

"Oh, I habe a lecture series arranged at te Jobian Academy of Sciences. Tey are quite commendably aware of my importance. I will be glad to get off Eart. Te air pressure, te grabity, pfui!"

"But a . . . a person . . . of your distinction, traveling third class—"

"Naturally, tey gabe me a first-class ticket. I turned it in, bought a tird-class, and banked te difference." He glowered at Dyann Korlas.

"To' if I am treated like tis—" He shrugged. A Martian shrugging is quite a sight. "No real matter. We of Uttu—Mars, as you insist on calling it—are so incomparably far adbanced in te philosophic birtues of serenity, generosity, and modesty tat I can accept barbaric mistreatment wit te scorn tat it deserbes."

"Oh," said Ray. To the Centaurianess: "And may I ask why you are bound for Jupiter, Ms.—Ms?—Korlas?"

"You may," she allowed. "And let us use first names, no? That is sveet. . . . Vell, I vish to see Yupiter, though I do not think it vill be as glamorous as Earth." She sighed. "You live in a fable! Your beastless carriages, your flyin machines, your auto—auto-*matic* kitchens, your clocks, your colorful clothes, your qvaint customs—*haa*, it vas vorth the long travel yust to see such things."

Long, for certain; fantastically powerful though they were, the exploratory ships needed ten years to cross the interstellar gulf, and there had only been three expeditions to date. Dyann had arrived with the latest, part of a delegation and inquiry group dispatched by her queen. Ray had heard that the crew had quite a time with that turbulent score until everybody settled down in suspended animation. The visitors had now spent about a year on Earth and Luna, endlessly curious, especially as to what their hosts did to pass the time since the World Union had arisen to terminate the practice of war. By and large, they'd caused remarkably little trouble. A couple of times tempers had flared and Terrestrial bones gotten broken, but the Varannians were always apologetic afterward. To be sure, once one of them had been scheduled to address a women's club. . . .

"Tell me this I am not clear about," Dyann requested. "The Yovians, they did begin on your planet?"

Ray nodded. "Yes. They colonized the moons partly for economic reasons, partly because they didn't like the way Europe was becoming homogenized, Asian and African immigrants were getting numerous, and so on. About sixty years ago, they declared their independence. After a lot of debate, the leaders of Earth decided the issue wasn't worth fighting about. That may have been a mistake."

"Vy?"

"M-m-m . . .well, it's true they had certain economic grievances, after the heroic work their pioneers had done—and they themselves are still doing, I must admit. Nevertheless, they live under a dictatorship that keeps telling them they're the destined masters of the Solar System. Last year they occupied and claimed the Saturnian moon colonies. Their pretext was almighty thin, but the Union was too chicken-livered to do more than squawk. Not that it has much of a navy compared to theirs."

Dyann beamed. "Ha, you might really have a var vile I am here to see? Lovely, lovely!" She clapped her hands.

A knock on the door interrupted, and the steward bore in the luggage marked "Wanted on Voyage." When he was gone, the cabin occupants got busy unpacking and stowing. Dyann changed into a fur-trimmed robe, confirming Ray's guess that the scenery was gorgeous. Urushkidan slithered to the deck, extracted from his trunk several books, papers, penstyls, and a humidor, and appropriated the dresser top for these.

Unease touched Ray. "You know, sir," he said, "apart from the honor of meeting you, I wish you weren't aboard."

"Why not?" demanded the Martian huffily.

"U-u-uh-h . . . it was your formulation of general relativity that showed it's possible to travel faster than light."

"Among many oter tings, yes," said Urushkidan through malodorous clouds.

"I can't believe the Jovians are interested in your work for its own sake. I suspect they hope to get your guidance in developing that kind of ship. Then we'd all better beware."

"Not I. A Martian is not concerned wit te squabbles of te lower animals. Noting personal, you understand."

Dyann took forth a small wooden image and placed it on the shelf above her bunk. It was gaudily painted and fiercely tusked; each of its arms held a weapon, one being a Terrestrial tommy gun. "Qviet, please," she said, raising an arm. "I am about to pray to Ormun the Terrible."

"An appropriate god for the likes of you," sneered Urushkidan.

She stuffed a pillow from the bunk into his mouth. "Qviet, please, I said," she reproached him with a gentle smile, and prostrated herself before the idol.

After a while, during which she had chanted a prayer full of snarling noises, she got up. Urushkidan was still speechless, with rage. Dyann turned to Ray. "Do you know if this ship has any live animals for sale?" she asked. "I vould like to make a sacrifice too."

II.

After the *Jovian Queen* got under weigh, her captain announced that, given the present planetary configuration, she would complete her passage, at a steady one Terrestrial gee of positive and negative acceleration, in six standard days, 43 minutes, and 12 ± 10 seconds. That might be braggadocio, though Ray Tallantyre would not have been surprised to learn it was sober truth. He soon started wishing the time would prove overestimated. His roommates wore on his nerves. Urushkidan filled the place with smoke, sat up till all hours covering paper with mathematical symbols, and screamed if anybody spoke above a whisper. Dyann meant well, but limited vocabulary soon caused her conversation to pall; besides, she was mostly off in the gymnasium, working out. When she wasn't, her forcefulness often reminded him of Katrina Vanbrugh, occasioning shudders.

On the second day out, he slouched moodily into the bar and ordered a martini he could ill afford. The ship's food was so wholesome that he wasn't sure he could choke any more down otherwise. The chamber was quiet except for Wagnerian music in the background, discreetly enough lit that the murals of pioneers and soldiers weren't too conspicuous, and not very full. At one table sat the colonel who had accompanied Ray aloft, still clutching his briefcase but talking with quite human animation to a red-headed female tourist from Earth. Her shape, in a skin-tight StarGlo gown, left small doubt as to his objective. The purity of the Jovian race, "hardened in the fire and ice of the outer deeps, tempered by adversity to form the new and dominant mankind," had been set aside for a while in favor of international relations.

She didn't look as fascinated as she might have. *If I had some money*, sighed within Ray, *I bet I could pry her loose from him*.

For lack of that possibility, he fell into conversation with the bartender. The latter informed him, in awed tones, that yonder he beheld Colonel Ivan Hosea Domenico Roshevsky-Feldkamp, late military attaché of the Confederation's Terrestrial embassy, an officer who had served with distinction in suppressing the Ionian revolt and in asserting his nation's rightful claims to Saturn.

Things got livelier when a couple of fellows entered from second class. North Americans like Ray, they were quick to make his acquaintance and ready to stand him drinks. After an hour or two, they suggested a friendly game of poker.

Oh, ho! thought the engineer, who was less naïve than he often appeared. "Sure," he agreed. "How about right after dinner?"

Joined by a third of their kind, they met him in a proper stateroom and play commenced. It went on for most of the following two days and evenings. Fortune went back and forth in a way that would have impressed the average person as genuine. Ray kept track, and made occasional bets that ought to have proven disastrous, and when he was alone ran off statistical analyses on his calculator. He was winning entirely too much, and the rate of it was increasing on far too steep a curve. These genial chaps were setting him up for disaster.

When he was a couple of thousand Union credits to the good, he let febrile cupidity glitter from him and said, "Look, boys, you know I'm traveling on the cheap, but I do have money at home and this game is too good for kiddie antes. Suppose I lase my bank to transfer some credit to the purser's office here, and tomorrow we can play for real stakes."

"Sure, Ray, if you want," said the lead shark, delighted to have the suggestion made for him. "You're a sport, you are."

At the appointed hour, he and his companions met again around the table, lit anticipatory cigars, and waited.

And waited.

And waited.

Ray had found the redhead remarkably easy to pry loose from the colonel.

She thought it would be great fun to go slumming and join him in the third-class dining room for the captain's dinner. First class was too stuffy, she said. He escorted her down a corridor, thinking wistfully, and a trifle wearily, that soon the trip would end and he'd disembark in Wotanopolis as broke as ever. She'd made him free of the luxury and spaciousness of her section, but since he avoided the bar—and possible embarrassing confrontations therein—she tacitly assumed that he would pay for refreshments ordered from the staff. Besides, she liked to gamble, and the ship's casino was not rigged.

The sight of Urushkidan distracted him from his generally pleasant recollections. Awkward under Earth weight, the Martian was creeping along toward the saloon reserved for his species; the choice between mealtime segregation and decorum by either standard had been made long ago. He condescended to give

the human a greeting: "Well, tere you are. I hope you habe not been found obnoxious."

The trouble actually began with Dyann Korlas, who appeared a moment later in finery of leather boots, fur kilt, gold armbands, necklace of raw gemstones, and polychromatic body paint. Striding up behind Ray, she clapped a hand on his shoulder which almost felled him.

"Vere have you been?" she asked reproachfully. "You vent avay, and you vere so long."

The redhead blushed.

"Oh, hello," Ray said, feeling a touch awkward himself. "What have you been up to?"

Dyann's glance scuttled back and forth. "I think better we ask vat have you have been up to," she laughed. "Ah, you dashin, glamorous Earthmen!"—looking down on him by about fifteen centimeters. She pushed in between him and his date, amiably linking arms with both. "Come, ve go feed together, no?"

They reached the companionway leading to the dining room, and there stood three much too familiar figures. Ray felt a thunderbolt go through his head. He'd not counted on this.

"Hey, Tallantyre!" exclaimed the largest of his poker buddies. Somehow the entire trio seemed bigger than before. "What the hell happened to you? We were going to have another game, remember?"

"I forgot," Ray said around a lump in his gullet.

"Aw, you couldn't've," another man replied. "Look, a sport like you wouldn't quit when he's way ahead, would you?"

"We still got time for a session," added the third.

"But I don't have any more money," Ray protested.

"Now, wait a minute, pal," said the largest. "You want to be a good sport, don't you? Sure you do. You don't want to make any trouble. It wouldn't be good for you, believe me."

The trio crowded close. Backed against the bulkhead, Ray stared past them. Passengers on their way to dinner ignored the unpleasantness, as people generally do. An exception was, of all possible individuals, Colonel Roshevsky-Feldkamp. Though his table was in first class, he must have been getting a drink in the bar—or was his presence more significant than that? Certainly he stood and watched with his iron features tinged by smugness.

Did he put these gullyhanses up to accosting me? Ray wondered wildly. *He could very well be bearing a grudge and—and—would this kind of threat be possible without some kind of* sub rosa *hint that the ship's officers won't interfere?*

"Now why don't you come on back to my cabin and we'll talk about this," proposed the largest. Three tight grins moved in on the engineer. The redhead squeaked and shrank aside.

Dyann scowled and touched the hilt of her sword. "Are these men annoyin you, Ray?" she asked.

"Oh, no, we just want a quiet little private talk with our friend," said the chief card player. He closed a meaty hand on the engineer's arm and tugged. "You come along now, okay, Tallantyre?"

Ray ran a dried-out tongue over unsteady lips. "Dyann," he mumbled, "I think they are starting to annoy me."

"Oh, vell, in that case—" She grinned happily, reached out, and took hold of the nearest man.

Something like a small explosion followed. The man went whirling aloft, struck the overhead, caromed off a bulkhead, hit the deck, and bounced a couple of times more before lying stunned.

Almost by reflex, his companions had attacked the amazon. "Ormun is kind!" she shouted in joy and gave one a mouthful of knuckles. Teeth flew.

The third had gotten behind her. He plucked the dagger from her belt and raised it. Ray seized his wrist. Bigger and stronger, he tore loose with a force that sent the engineer staggering, and followed. Ray lurched against Roshevsky-Feldkamp. Without thought for anything except a weapon to use when the knife confronted him, he yanked the colonel's briefcase free, raised it in both hands, and brought it down on his enemy's head. It made a dull *thwack* and stopped the gambler in his tracks. Ray hit him again. The briefcase burst open and papers snowed through the air. Then Dyann, having put her second opponent out of the game, turned to this third and proceeded with martial arts practice.

Save for the redhead, who had departed screaming, spectators milled about at a respectful distance. Now Roshevsky-Feldkamp advanced from among them, livid. "I'm terribly sorry, sir," gasped Ray, who didn't think he needed such a personage angry at him. "Here, let me help—"

He went to his knees and began to collect scattered papers and stuff them back into the briefcase. In a dazed fashion he noticed that a number of them bore diagrams of apparatus. A polished boot took him in the rear. He skidded through the mass of documents. "You un-

utterable idiot!" Roshevsky-Feldkamp yelled.

"You vould hurt my friend?" Dyann said indignantly. "I vill teach you better manners."

The colonel drew his revolver. "Stand where you are," he snapped. "You are both under arrest."

Dyann's broad smooth shoulders sagged. "Oh," she said in a meek voice. "Let me yust carry him"—she pointed at the gambler who was totally unconscious—"for a doctor to see." Bending over, she picked him up.

"March," the Jovian ordered her.

"Yes, sir," she said, and tossed her burden at him. He went over on his backside. She kicked him in the belly and he too lost interest in further combat.

"That vas fun," she chuckled. "Vat shall ve do next?"

"You," said Urushkidan acidly, "are a typical human."

Through the open door of a cabin which had been declared the ship's brig for his benefit, Ray gazed in appeal at his visitor, who had come by request. There was no guard; a chain around his ankle secured the Earthling quite well. "What else could I do?" he pleaded. "Try fighting the entire crew? As was, it took every bit of persuasion I had in me to get Dyann to surrender."

"I mean tat you fought in te first place," Urushkidan scolded. "I hear it started ober a female. Why don't you lower species habe a regular rutting season as we do on Uttu? Ten you could perhaps act sensibly te rest of te year."

"Well—Please, sir! You're the only hope I've got. They won't even tell me what's become of Dyann."

"Oh, tey questioned her, found she cannot read, and dismissed te charges of mayhem and mutiny. Roshevsky-Feldkamp himself agreed she had acted 'in te heat of te moment,' alto' I beliebe I detected a sour note in his boice. She will be all right."

"I'm glad of that much," Ray said, a trifle surprised to notice his own sincerity. "Of course, no doubt the Jovians figured punishing one of our first interstellar visitors would raise more stink on Earth than it could be worth to them. But what's her illiteracy got to do with it? And how do you know they inquired about that?"

"She mentioned it to me afterward. I ten recalled how carefully I had been interrogated, like ebery witness, to make sure I could not habe seen what was in te colonel's papers from tat briefcase. Obbiously tey are top secret and I suspect tey are information about Eart's military situation, gatered by spies for him to take back in person. You are being held prisoner because you did see tem."

"What? But damn it, I never stopped to read anything!'

"You must habe unconscious memories which a hypnoquiz could bring out. If noting else, tat would alert te Union to te existence of a Jobian espionage network. Dyann lacks te word-gestalts, she could not retain any meaningful images, but you— Well, tat is your bad luck. I suppose ebentually te Terrestrial embassy can negotiate your release, after te Jobians habe had time to cober teir tracks on Eart."

"No, not then," Ray groaned. "They'll never bother. There's a warrant out for me at home. Besides, old Vanbrugh will be only too pleased to see me get the rotary shaft."

"Banbrugh—te Nort American member of te World Council?"

"Uh-huh." Ray slumped where he stood. "And to think I was a plain underpaid engineer till Uncle Hosmer left me a million credits in his will. I hope he's frying in hell."

Urushkidan's eyes bugged till they seemed about to push off his spectacles. "A man left you money and you resent it? Ten why habe you talked about being poor?"

"Because I am. I spent the whole sum."

"Shalmuannasar! On what?"

"Oh, wine, women, song, the usual."

Urushkidan winced as if in physical pain. "A million credits, and not a millo inbested."

"Meanwhile I got into high society," Ray explained. "I made out as if I had more than I actually did, not to defraud anybody, only so as not to be scoffed at. Katrina Vanbrugh—that's the Councillor's daughter—got the idea I'd make a good fifth husband, or would it have been the sixth? I forget. Well, she's not bad-looking, and she has a headlong way about her, and the upshot was that we became engaged. Big social event. Except then a reporter grew nosy, and found out my fortune was practically gone, and Katrina decided I'd only been after her money and now she and her parents were a laughingstock. . . . Vanbrugh had me charged with criminal misrepresentation. Quite false—oh, maybe I had shaded the truth a little, but I honestly didn't think it'd make any difference to Katrina when I got around to admitting it, she being as rich as she is—the family just wanted revenge. How could I fight that kind of power? I panicked and

skipped. Maybe that was foolish; certainly it's made my case worse. The upshot is that the Jovians can do anything to me they feel like."

He flung out his arms. "Sir, can't you put in a good word for me?" he begged. "You're famous, admired, influential if you choose to be. Couldn't you please help?"

The Martian inflated himself in the equivalent of simper, then deflated and said with mild regret, "No, I cannot entangle myself in te empirical. It is too distracting, and my work too important. My domain is te beauty and purity of matematics. I adbise you to accept your fate wit philosophy. If you wish, I can lend you a copy of Ekbannutil's *Treatise on te Insignificance of Temporal Sorrows*."

Ray collapsed onto his bunk and buried face in hands. "No, thanks."

Urushkidan waved affably and waddled off.

Presently the spaceship entered orbit around Ganymede. A squad of soldiers arrived to bring Ray down to the moon. Roshevsky-Feldkamp took personal charge of that.

"Where am I going?" the Earthling asked.

"To Camp Muellenhoff, near Wotanopolis," the colonel told him with pleasure. "It is where we keep spies until we have completed their interrogation and are ready to shoot them."

III.

Dyann Korlas needed a couple of Terrestrial days to decide that she didn't like Ganymede.

The Jovians had been entirely courteous to her, offering a stiff apology for the unfortunate incident en route and assigning her a lieutenant in the Security Corps for a guide. Within limits, he indulged her curiosity about armaments, and she found her conducted tours of military facilities more impressive than anything corresponding that she had seen on Earth. However, granted that plasma-jet spacecraft, armored gun carriers, and nuclear missiles had capabilities beyond those of swords, bows, and cavalry, still, they took the fun out of combat and left nothing to plunder. She missed the brawling mirth of Kathantuman encampments among these endlessly and expressionlessly marching ranks, these drab uniforms and impersonal machines.

The civilians were still more depressingly clad, and their orderliness, their instant obedience before any official, their voluminous praises to her of the wonders of Symmetrism, the tiny apartments in which they were housed, soon made her nerves crawl. The officer caste did possess a certain dash and glamour which she would have enjoyed, had it not been exclusively male. She had found the Terrestrial concept of sexual equality interesting, even perversely exciting; but the Jovians had not simply changed the natural order of things, they had turned it upside down, and she found herself regarding them as a race of perverts.

The standard sights were often fascinating. Below ground, Wotanopolis was a many-leveled hive of industry; she admired especially the countless engineering accomplishments which made human life here so triumphantly safe and ordinary. The views above ground were often magnificent in their stark fashion: Jupiter like a huge moon, softly lambent, in a twilit heaven; an auroral shimmer in the phantom-thin air, where the force-fields created by enormous generators warded off radiation that would otherwise have been lethal; crags, craters, mountains, glaciers; a crystalline forest, a splendidly leaping animal, the marvel that life had arisen here too, here too.

Yet the impression grew upon her that she was being hurried along, from sight to sight and conversatiom to conversation, without ever a chance really to talk to anyone, to glimpse whatever soul there dwelt beneath the busy flesh. True, she heard lectures about the superiority of Jovian society and its clear right to leadership of the Solar System, till she lost count. Nonetheless she wondered if the people she met would have been that monomaniacal had her guide not been present. Besides, if they felt they ought to rule, why didn't they just hop into their spaceships and have at the Earthlings?

Everywhere she saw portraits of the Leader, a short and puffy-faced man named Martin Wilder. Once Lieutenant Hamand, the person conducting her, said in awe that, if the Leader was not too occupied with cares of state, she might actually be introduced to him. Hamand looked hurt when she yawned.

Meanwhile, she fretted about Ray Tallantyre. Though she hadn't really seen much of her erstwhile roommate, she had found him uncommonly appealing. In part, she recognized, that was no doubt because, what with one thing and another, she hadn't gotten laid for some time when she boarded the liner, nor had she since. But in part, also, she liked his liveliness and wry humor. They contrasted vividly with the humble men of her homeland. She had confirmed for herself that male Earthlings often deserved the reputation they had won among female Varannians; she suspected that Ray exceeded the average. It was unlikely that

he'd adjust well to harem life, but she had no such plans for him. It was impossible that he, belonging to a different species, could father a child of hers. Right now, that was no drawback at all.

She'd been looking forward to developing the acquaintance on Ganymede. Then he got into trouble, and she'd not been able to discover a thing about his present situation. Under pressure, Hamand had put her in touch with an officer of the political police, who said that the case was under consideration and advised her not to get involved. If nothing else, he said, her tour of the Jovian System would end before the matter had been disposed of. He concluded with assurances that Tallantyre would "receive justice," which she did not find very satisfactory.

Her concern sprang from more than attraction. That had caused her to think of Ray as a friend—and in Kathantuma, one did not abandon a friend. They hadn't exchanged blood oaths or anything like that. Nevertheless, the fact that she had enjoyed his company led her warrior conscience toward the illogical conclusion that she owed him her help.

This did not come about overnight, nor in any such clear terms. What she experienced was simply an anxiety which grew and grew. It fed upon her distaste for the civilization which currently surrounded her. If Ray had offended these creatures, well, they needed offending. Could she be less brave?

Ganymede swung once about Jupiter, a period of a week, while Dyann Korlas wrestled ever more with her emotional and ethical dilemma. At last she did the proper thing according to her own beliefs: alone in her quarters, save for a bottle of whiskey, she brought the matter out before herself, considered it explicitly, realized that it was indeed important to her, and resolved that she would no longer stay idle. In the morning she would seek divine guidance.

That decision made, she slept well.

At 0600 hours, as always, lights flashed on throughout Wotanopolis to decree a new day. Dyann bounded out of bed, sang a cheerful song of clattering swords and cloven skulls while she washed and dressed—cuirass, helmet, sword, dagger above tunic and sandals—and sought the kitchenette of her apartment, where she prepared a breakfast that would have sufficed two Terrestrial laborers. Ordinary Jovians knew no such luxuries, but she rated diplomatic housing.

When she entered the main room, she found Hamand present; crime was alleged to have been stamped out of Symmetrist society, and locks on civilian doors were thought to suggest that those within might be talking sedition. A powerfully built young man, immaculate in gray cloth and shiny boots, he bowed from the waist. "Good day," he greeted. "You will recollect that we are going topside to visit the Devil's Garden. At 1145 we will proceed to Heroville, where we will appreciate the Revolutionary Cenotaph and have lunch. At 1300 hours we have an appointment to fill out the necessary documents for your forthcoming visit to Callisto. Threreafter—"

"Hold," Dyann interrupted. "First I have a reliyious rite."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Vy? You have done no wrong." Dyann gestured to the image of Ormun, standing ferocious on a table. "I must ask for the counsel of this god." She paused, struck by a thought. "You better—vat is the vord?—you better prostrate yourself too."

"What?" cried the lieutenant.

"She does not like atheists," Dyann explained.

Hamand flushed and stiffened. "Madame," he said, "I have been educated in the scientific principles of Symmetrism. They do not include groveling before idols."

Dyann took him by the back of his neck, bore him down to his knees, and rubbed his nose in the carpet. "You vill please to grovel," she said amiably. "It is good manners." She spread herself prone, while keeping a grip on him, and recited a magical formula. Thereafter she let him go, rose to a crouch, dredged three Kathantuman dice from the purse at her belt, and tossed them.

"*Haa,*" she murmured after study. "The omen says—vell, I am not a *marya,* a certified vitchvife, but I do think the omen says I should seek Urushkidan. See, here the Visdom sign lies right next to the Mystery sign, vith the Crossed Axes over here. . . . Yes, I am sure Ormun tells me I need to see Urushkidan." She bowed to the image. "Thank you, sveet lady. *Laesti laeskul itorum.*" Rising: "Shall ve go?"

Hamand, who had finished swallowing his resentment for the sake of public relations, was taken aback all over again. "Do you mean the Martian scientist?" he yelped. "Impossible! He is doing critically important work—"

Dyann strolled out into the corridor. She had been shown the Academy of Sciences earlier. No matter how alien this warren of passages was to her native forests, she retained

a huntress' sense of direction and landmarks. Hamand trailed her, gabbling, barely able to keep her in sight. There were no slideways. Except in the tunnels where authorized vehicles moved, everybody walked. It was a result of the government's concern over preserving public physical fitness in Ganymede's low gravity. Dyann felt feather-light. She proceeded in three- and four-meter bounds. When a clump of people got in the way of that, she sprang over their heads.

The Academy occupied 50 hectares on a high level of town, a pleasant break in an environment where the very parks were functional. Here, grass, trees, and flowerbeds made lanes of life between walls which, admittedly roofless, were at least covered with plastic ivy. Overhead, a teledome gave an awesome vision of Jupiter, stars, Milky Way, the shrunken sun. The air bore faint, flowery perfumes and recorded birdsong. Upon this campus, moving from building to building, were a number of persons, several obviously military personnel but most just as obviously scholars, little different from their colleagues on Earth.

Dyann stopped one of the latter, loomed over him, and asked where Dr. Urushkidan might be. "In Archimedes Hall—over there," he gasped, and tottered off, perhaps in search of a reviving cup of tea.

She might have known, Dyann thought. In front of that door, a soldier on guard clashed with the general atmosphere. She guessed his presence was due to the military significance of Urushkidan's work. Though her appearance startled him, too, rather badly, he slanted his rifle before him and cried, "Halt!"

Dyann obeyed. "I must see the Martian," she told him. "Please to let me by."

"Nobody sees him without a pass," he replied.

Dyann shoved him aside and took hold of the door switch. He yelled and batted at her with his rifle butt. That was his great mistake.

"You should show more respect for ladies," she chided, and removed the weapon from his grasp. Her free hand flung him across the greensward. He collided with Hamand, who had panted onto the scene, hard enough that neither was of much use for some time to come. Dyann admired the rifle—Earthlings on Varann were deplorably stingy about giving such things to her folk—before she slung it across her back by the strap. By now, too many passersby had halted to stare and chatter. Best she keep on the move. She opened the door and passed on through.

For a minute she poised in the hallway beyond, cocking her ears this way and that. They were keen. A faint sound of altercation gave her the clue she hoped for, and she bounded up a flight of stairs. Before another door she stopped to listen. Yes, that was the voice of Urushkidan, bubbling like an infuriated teakettle.

"I will not, sir, do you hear me? I will not. And I demand immediate return passage from tis ridiculous satellite."

"Come now, Dr. Urushkidan, do be reasonable." Was that Roshevsky-Feldkamp? "What is your complaint, actually? Do you not have generous financial compensation, Mars-conditioned lodgings, servants, every imaginable consideration? If you wish something further, inform us and we will try to provide it."

"I came here to lecture and to complete my matematical research. Now I find you habe arranged no lectures and expect me to superbise an—an *engineering* project—as if I were a mere empiricist!"

"But your contract plainly states—"

"Did you tink I would waste my baluable time reading one of your pieces of printed gibberish? Sir, in human law itself, a proper contract requires tat tere habe been a meeting of minds. Te mind of your goberment neber met te mind of myself. It was not capable of it."

The man attempted ingratiation: "You are a leading scientist. As such, you realize that science advances by checking theory against fact. If, with your help, we create a faster-than-light ship, it will be a total confirmation of your ideas."

"My ideas need no confirmation. Tey are a debelopment of certain implications of general relatibity, true. Howeber, tat is incidental. In principle, what I habe produced is a piece of pure matematics, elegant and beautiful. If it agrees or disagrees wit te facts, tat is of no concern to any proper philosopher. And furtermore—" The squeaky tones approached ultrasonic frequencies. "—not only do you want experimental tests, you want to me lend my genius to bulgar military applications! No, no, and again no! Do you understand? I want a ticket on te next ship bound for Mars!"

"I am afraid," said the man slowly, "that that will not be possible."

Dyann opened the door and trod through. "Are they annoyin you?" she asked.

Urushkidan goggled at her from the chair across which he was draped. The room was so thick with the fumes of his pipe that one of the two Jovians present, a bald man in the black tunic of the political police, was holding a handkerchief to his nose. The other was, indeed, Roshevsky-Feldkamp, who sprang to his feet and snatched for his revolver.

Dyann had already unlimbered the expropriated rifle. She aimed it at his midriff. "Better not," she warned him. He froze.

"What . . . you . . . what are you doing here?" stammered the political officer.

"Lookin for Ray Tallantyre," she answered. "Could you tell me vere he is?"

"Guards!" Roshevsky-Feldkamp bellowed fearlessly. "Help!"

Dyann made a leap across the room, seized him by the neck, and hammered his forehead against the desk. With her right hand she kept the second Jovian covered. "I asked you vere is Ray Tallantyre," she reminded him.

"I am glad you came," Urushkidan told her. "Shall we leabe tis uncibilized place?" Two soldiers appeared in the doorway. "Perhaps not."

Dyann swung her rifle around. She was a trifle slow. Both newcomers already had weapons unlimbered, and opened fire. She dropped behind the desk. Twin streams of slugs pierced its mass, seeking her. She took it by the legs and heaved. It arced high over the floor and landed on the soldiers in a burst of drawers, papers, penstyls, and books. They went down beneath it and stayed there, stunned.

The secret police officer had taken advantage of the distraction to snatch forth his sidearm. He trained it on Dyann as she rose. Urushkidan snaked forth a tentacle and pulled him off his feet. Dyann paused to knock Roshevsky-Feldkamp unconscious before she closed fingers around the other man's Adam's apple. "Vere you not listenin?" she growled. "Vere is Ray Tallantyre?"

"Come, no delay, prudence requires we get out of here," urged the Martian.

Perforce, Dyann agreed. She hadn't really intended to get into a brawl. Things had just sort of happened. "Vat's a safe vay to go?" she inquired.

"Tis way. I'be been shown around. Follow me." Urushkidan paused to relieve both officers of their pistols. He carried one in either hand, gingerly, as if he feared they might explode. Dyann frogmarched the political policeman out into the hall after him. Shouts of alarm rang through it, coming nearer; she heard the thud of military boots.

"Hurry," Urushkidan gasped. "Shalmuannasar, we habe te entire Jobian Confederacy after us!" Since he could not move as fast as a human or Centaurian, Dyann expedited matters by picking him up and draping him over her prisoner's head.

They rounded a corner and clattered down several flights of stairs to a steel door marked HANGAR. AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY. It wasn't locked. Passing through, they found themselves in a cavernous enclosure where several small spacecraft rested on mobile cradles. Mechanics stared at the trio.

"Tese are bessels for scientific use around te surface," Urushkidan explained. "We want one."

A superintendent hurried up, obviously puzzled but afraid to comment. "You heard vat ve vant," Dyann whispered, and squeezed her captive at the shoulder, quite gently, only enough to make bones creak.

"Yes," the officer gasped through the tentacles that curtained his face. "Practice maneuvers. We . . . we have immediate requirement of a fully-equipped craft. Mission confidential and —ow-w-w!—urgent."

"Yes, sir," responded a lifetime's training in blind obedience. However, the crew was a little less efficient than usual. They kept stealing looks.

As a teardrop-shaped boat trundled forth, Dyann held most of her attention on the door through which she had entered. Pursuit might reopen it at any instant. Surely by now Roshevsky-Feldkamp and the soldiers had been found. It shouldn't take somebody long to think of the possibility that her group had fled hither.

"I'll start the warmup, sir," the head mechanic said.

"No, don't bother, ve'll take her straight out," Dyann replied.

Aghast, he protested, "Madame, you don't understand. That'll cause carbon deposits in the tubes. You'll risk engine failure, a crash—"

"You find that an acceptable risk," Dyann told the secret policeman.

"Yes, of course I do," he choked. "The . . . the Leader tells us no hazard is too great for the cause."

Dyann propelled him ahead of her through the airlock. In the control cabin, she pushed him into the pilot's recoil chair, which she recognized from her travels around Earth. "I hope you can fly vun of these," she said.

"I hope so too," added Urushkidan. He slithered off the Jovian, secured the airlock, and knitted himself to a passenger seat.

"Ve are goin to find Ray Tallantyre," Dyann instructed the man. Part of her thought that she was beginning to sound obsessive. Yet, given the witch's brew of events in which she had somehow submerged herself, it was as reasonable a plan of action as any. Ray's shrewdness and sophistication might lend her the vital extra help, when Ormun was being left behind. In fact, this appeared to have been Ormun's intention.

"What do you mean?" the officer asked. He seemed a trifle disconcerted and confused.

"Ray Tallantyre, the Earthman that vas arrested off the *Yovian Qveen*," Dyann said with what she congratulated herself was exemplary patience, "You in your service ought to know vere he is kept. Vould some blows refresh your memory?"

"Camp Muellenhoff, you savage!" he got out. "North of the city. You'll never succeed. You'll kill us all."

Dyann smiled. "Then ve vill feast forever vith the gods, in the Hall of Skulls," she comforted him. "Von't that be nice?"

The cradle got into motion, rumbling toward the hangar airlock. Up a long ramp . . . into the chamber . . . darkness outside, as valves closed . . . hollow noise of pumps, withdrawing air. . . . Urushkidan relit his pipe with shaky tendrils. Dyann whistled tunelessly between her teeth.

"I am not so sure we are wise," the Martian said. "Tis bessel cannot carry us away from te Jobian System, or eben to anoter satellite of te planet."

"No, you are not wise," the political officer agreed eagerly.

"Hindsight vill show," Dyann responded. "Meanvile, *you* vould be most unvise not to pilot like I tell you."

The outer valve opened. The cradle rolled out onto the field. Behind that flat expanse, the dome which covered Wotanopolis glowed against sawtoothed mountains, rearing above a near horizon, and starlit sky. The dwarfed pale sun cast luminance from the west. Only one other spacecraft was in sight, a black shape which Dyann could identify as a patrol ship.

"They vill come out after us in force pretty soon," she said. "Vat can ve do about that boat yonder, ha?" She reached a decision. "Ah, yes." Her involuntary pilot received his orders. When he clamored refusal, she reminded him, briefly but painfully, that he was no volunteer but, indeed, an impressed man. The engine thuttered and the little scientific craft rose.

Having reached altitude, she descended again, sufficiently to play her jets across the patrol ship. That was not good for the patrol ship.

Dyann didn't bother to receive whatever they were trying to tell her from the control tower. "Now," she stated as her boat rose anew, "you, my policeman friend, take us to this prison and make them release Tallantyre to us. If this goes okay, ve vill set you free somevere. If not—" she passed the edge of her knife across the back of his hand, neatly shaving off hairs, "you may still be a police, but you might not be a man."

"You unutterable monster," he said.

"It is nicer droppin nuclear missiles on cities?" she asked, genuinely bemused.

"Yes," Urushkidan snickered, "I habe had a digestibe pouch full of you Jobians talking about te glories of war and destiny and te will of te Race and historical necessity and suchlike tings. Perhaps in future you will wish to employ more logical rigor."

The flight was short to Camp Muellenhoff. It lay out on the surface, a cluster of pressure huts around a watchtower. There was no

barbed wire; the Ganymedean environment gave ample security. If a spacesuited prisoner did slip away from a work detail, the sole question was whether a local monster would get him before his oxygen or his heatpack was exhausted.

When the boat landed in the area, such a figure was urged toward her airlock by a couple of others. The political officer had radioed ahead the demand he was supposed to, quite convincingly. A voice did rattle out of her receiver: "Sir, I've been ordered to ask if you really want to bring this prisoner back to town. We've lately been alerted to watch out for a party of escaped desperadoes."

"Yes," the secret policeman said between clenched teeth, "I want him back in town. Oh, how I want him back in town!"

The captive stumbled into the cabin. Ice promptly formed over his armor. Dyann gave a command, the boat stood on her tail and screamed off toward parts unknown, the newly rescued person clattered against the after bulkhead and lay asprawl.

Presently, when they were flying on an even keel, he opened his faceplate. Slightly battered, the countenance of Ray Tallantyre emerged. "*Haa-ai,* dear sweetheart!" Dyann cried. She reached for him, touched his suit, and withdraw her hand with a yelp. "How are you?" she asked, not very distinctly since she was sucking frostbitten fingers.

"Well . . . I . . . well, not too bad," he answered out of his bewilderment. "A rough time but . . . mainly it was truth drugs . . . they told me I'd be shot as a, a precautionary measure—"

"Poor, dear Ray! Poor little Earthlin! Lie easy. I vill soon take care of you."

"Yeah, I'm afraid you will."

"Te immediate question," Urushkidan said, "is, Tallantyre, can you pilot a behicle of tis type?"

"Well, uh; yes, I suppose I can," Ray answered. "Looks like a modified Astrid-Luscombe. . . . Yes, I can."

"Good. Ten we can drop tis creature here. I do not like and/or trust him. He smells of phenylalanine—Dyann! Do you mean we are not simply going to *drop* him?"

"I made my promise," the woman said.

They descended on a rocky plateau, gave the secret policeman a spacesuit, and dismissed him. He should be able to reach the camp, given reasonable luck. Nevertheless he bemoaned his maltreatment.

"And now, vat next?" Dyann asked blithely.

"Lord knows," Ray sighed. "I suppose we find us a place in the wilderness where we aren't likely to be spotted for a while, and take stock. Maybe, in some crazy fashion, we can contact the Union embassy. You and Urushkidan ought to rate diplomatic intervention, and I can ride on your cloaks. Maybe. First we find that hideyhole, and second we prepare to skedaddle if we spy a Jovian flyer."

He strapped into the master seat and tickled the controls. The boat lifted readily, but after a moment began to shake, while ominous noises came through the engine-room radiation wall.

"Could tat be te effects of carbon deposits in te tubes tat we were warned about?" wondered Urushkidan.

Ray grimaced. "You mean you took off without proper warmup? Yes, I'm afraid it is." His fingers danced across the board. The response he got was erratic. "We'll have to land soon. Else we crash. It'll take a week before the radioactivity is low enough that we can go out and clean the jets."

"And meanvile is a satellite-vide hunt after us.", Dyann's clear brow wrinkled. "Is Ormun offended because I did not invite her alon? It does seem our luck is runnin low."

"And," said Ray, "how!"

IV.

He used the last sputter of ions to set down in a valley which appeared to be as wild and remote as one could hope for. However, when he got a look through a viewport, he wondered if he hadn't overdone it.

Around the boat was a stretch of seamed and pitted stone, sloping up on every side toward fang-cragged hills. The glow of Jupiter shimmered, weirdly colored, off a distant glacier and a closer pool of liquid methane. The latter had begun boiling; its vapors obscured the tiny sun and streamed ragged across a stand of gaunt, glassy plants. Quite a wind must be blowing out there, though too tenuous for him to hear through the hull. At this time of day, when the hemisphere had warmed, the air—which still didn't amount to much more than a contaminated vacuum—consisted mostly of carbon dioxide, with some methane, amonia, and nitrogen: not especially breathable. Even Urushkidan couldn't survive those conditions without proper gear. This craft's heating and atmosphere regeneration plants had better be in good working order.

An animal passed across the view in kangaroo-like bounds. While small, it gave him

another reason not to want to go outdoors. Ganymedean biochemistry depended on heat-absorbent materials; the thermal radiation of a spacesuited human attracted animals, and carnivores were apt to try eating their way directly to the source.

Ray turned to his companions. "Well," he sighed, "what shall we do now?"

Dyann's eyes lit up. "Hunt monsters?" she suggested.

"Bah!" Urushkidan writhed his way toward the laboratory compartment, where there was a desk. "You do what you like except not to disturb me. I habe an interesting aspect of unified field teory to debelop."

"Look," said Ray, "we've got to take action. If we sit here passive, waiting for the time when we can clean those tubes, we're too bloody likely to be found."

"What do you imagine we can effect?"

"Oh, I don't know. Camouflage, maybe? Damnation, I have to do *something!*"

"I don't, apart from my matematics. Leabe me out of any idiotic schemes you may hatch."

"But if they catch us, we'll be killed!"

"I won't be," said Urushkidan smugly. "I am too baluable."

"You're a, uh, an accessory of ours."

"True, I did get carried away in te excitement. My hope was to aboid habing to waste my genius toiling for a mere engineering project. Tat hope has apparently been disappointed. Well, ten, te logical ting for me to do when te Jobians arribe is to go ahead and complete te dreary ting for tem, so tey will let me go home . . . wit proper payment for my serbices, I trust." The Martian paused. "As for you two, I will try to make it a condition tat your libes be spared. I am, after all, a noble person. I doubt you will eber be set free, but tink how many years you will habe, undistracted, to cultibate philosophical resignation."

Dyann tugged at Ray's sleeve. "Come on," she urged. "Let's hunt monsters."

"Waaah!" Goaded beyond endurance, the Earthman jumped on high—and, in Ganymedean gravity, cracked his pate on the overhead.

"Oh, poor darlin!" Dyann exclaimed, and folded him in an embrace that would have done credit to a bear.

"Let me go!" he raged. "Somebody here better think past the next minute!"

"You really must work on serenity," Urushkidan advised him. "Consider tings from te aspect of eternity. You are only a lower animal. Your fate is of no importance."

"You conceited octopus!"

"Temper, temper." Urushkidan wagged a flexible finger at the man. "Let me remind you why you should heed me. If your reasoning powers are so weak tat you cannot demonstrate *a priori* tat Martians are always right—by definition—ten remember te facts. Martians are beautiful. Martians habe a benerable cibilization. Eben physically, we are superior; I can libe under Eart conditions, but I dare you to try staying alibe under Mars conditions. I double-dog dare you."

"Martians," gritted Ray, "didn't come to Earth. Earthmen came to Mars."

"Of course. We had no reason to bisit you, but you had ebery reason to make pilgrimages to us, hoping tat a little beauty and wisdom would rub off on you. Enough. I am going aft to carry on my research and do not want to be disturbed, except tat when you get te galley going, you may bring me a bite to eat. I can ingest your kind of food, you know. I cannot, howeber, positibely cannot abide te taste of asparagus or truffles. Do not prepare me any dish wit asparagus or truffles." Urushkidan started off along the deck.

"You know, Ray," said Dyann, "I have been thinkin, and you are right. Now is not the time to hunt monsters. Let's make love."

"Oh, God!" the human groaned. "If I could get away from you two lunatics, you'd see me exceed the speed of light doing it."

He stiffened where he stood.

"Yes?" asked Dyann.

"Lord, Lord, Lord," he whispered. "That's the answer."

"Yes, tat's right, talk no louder tan tat while I am tinking," Urushkidan said from the after door.

"The drive, the faster-than-light drive—" Ray broke into a war-dance around the cramped compartment, bounding from chairs to aisle and back. "We've got all kinds of scientific supplies and equipment, we've got the Solar System's top authority on the subject, I'm an engineer, everybody knows that the basic effects have been shown in the laboratory and a real drive is just a matter of development—We'll do it ourselves!"

"Not so loud, I told you," Urushkidan grumbled. He passed by the door and slammed it behind him.

"Dyann, Dyann," Ray warbled, "we're going home."

Her eyes filled with tears. "Do you vant to leave me already?" she asked. "Do you not like me?"

"No, no, no, I want to save our lives, our

freedom, that's all. Come on, let's go aft and take inventory. I'll need you to move the heavy stuff around."

Dyann shook her head. "No," she pouted. "If you don't care for me, vy should I help you?"

"Judas priest," Ray groaned. "Look, I love you, I adore you, I worship at your feet. Now will you give me a hand?"

Dyann brightened but insisted, "Prove it."

Ray kissed her. She seized him and responded enthusiastically.

"Yeow!" he screamed. "You're about to break my ribs! Leggo!" As she did: "Uh, we'll discuss this some other time, when we've less urgent business."

"Love," said Dyann, "has gotten to be very urgent business for me. Come here."

After a while Urushkidan opened the door. "If you two don't stop tose noises—" he began indignantly. His gaze went to the aisle. "Oh," he said. "Oh." He closed the door again.

Later, an aroma of coffee drew him back to the forward cabin. A disheveled Ray Tallantyre was busy at the little food preparation unit while Dyann sat polishing her sword and humming to herself.

"Well, hi," said the man with evident relief. "I guess we can get started. First, suppose I ask a few questions, to refresh and expand my knowledge of how this drive of yours works."

"It is not a dribe and it does not work," Urushkidan replied. "What I habe created is a structure of pure matematics. Besides, it is beyond te full comprehension of anybody but myself. Gibe me some coffee."

"You must have followed the experiments, though, and learned a good bit more along those lines from the Jovians who've been trying to build a usable device."

"Oh, yes, no doubt I could design someting if I wanted to. I don't want to. My current interests are too cosmic." Urushkidan accepted a cup and slurped.

"Look," Ray argued, "if the Jovians catch us, they'll force you to do it for them. And afterward they'll overrun Mars along with the other planets. Logistics will no longer be a problem for them, you see, nor will there be any defense against their missiles."

"Tat would be unfortunate, I admit. Neberteless, it would be downright tragic if my present train of tought were interrupted, as it would be if I gabe your project my full attention, which I would habe to do if it were to habe any chance of success. Te Jobians can afford to employ me on a part-time basis. Let tem conquer te Solar System. In a tousand years tey will be a footnote in te history books. My accomplishments will be remembered while te uniberse endures."

Dyann hefted her sword. "You will do vat he says," she growled.

"You dare not harm me," Urushkidan gibed; "it would leabe you stranded for te Jobians to take rebenge upon."

He finished his coffee. "Where is te tobacco?" he asked. "I habe used my own up."

"Jovians don't smoke," Ray informed him with savage satisfaction. "They consider it a degenerate habit."

"What?" The Martian's howl rattled the pot on the hotplate. "No tobacco aboard?"

"None. And I daresay your supply back in Wotanopolis has been confiscated and destroyed. That puts the nearest cigar store somewhere in the Asteroid Belt."

"Oh, no! How can I tink without my pipe? Te new cosmology ruined by tobacco shortage—" Urushkidan needed bare seconds to reach his decision. "Bery well. Tere is no help for it. If te nearest tobacco is millions of kilometers away, we must build te faster-tan-light engine at once.

"Also," he added thoughtfully, "if te Jobians did conquer te Solar System, tey might well prohibit tobacco on ebery world. Yes, you habe conbinced me, yours is a bital cause."

Ray made no attempt to use the Martian's equations in detail or to find elegant solutions of any. He merely wanted to compute the parameters of something that would work, and he proceeded with slashing approximations that brought screams of almost physical anguish from the other being.

He did, however, recognize the basic nature of Urushkidan's achievement, a final correlation of general relativity and wave mechanics whose formulation had certain surprising consequences.

Relativity deals with matter and energy, including potentials, which move at definite velocities that cannot exceed that of light. In contrast, wave mechanics treats the particle as a psi function which is only probably where it is. In the latter theory, point-to-point transitions are not speeds but shifts in the node of a complex wave. Urushkidan had abolished the contradiction by bringing in his own immensely generalized and refined concept of information as a condition of the plenum rather than as a physical quantity subject to physical limitations.

It then turned out that the phase velocity of matter waves—which, unlike the group velocity, can move at any speed—could actually carry information, so that the most probable position of a particle went from region to region with no restrictions on the time derivatives.

The trick was to establish such conditions in reality that the theoretical possibility was realized.

"As I understand it," Ray had said, early on, "the proper configuration of quark interchanges will set up a field of space-strain. A spacecraft will react against the entire mass of the universe, won't even need rockets. In fact, we have here the key to a lot of other things as well, like gravity control. Right?"

"Wrong," answered Urushkidan.

"Well, we'll build it anyhow," Ray said.

His ambition was not as crazy as it might seem—not quite. The theory was in existence and considerable laboratory work had been done. Despite his scorn for empirical science, Urushkidan's mind had stored away the data about these and was perfectly capable of seeing what direction research should take next. Moreover, he was in fact the sole person with a complete grasp of his concepts; no physicist had, as yet, comprehended every aspect of them. Given motivation, he flung the full power of his intellect against the problem of practical application. Ray Tallantyre was actually quite a good engineer where it came to producing hardware. That hardware was not really complex, either, any more than a transistor or a tunnel diode is complex; the subtlety lies in the physical principles employed. In the present case, what was required was, basically, power, which the spacecraft had, and circuits with certain resonances, which could be constructed out of available materials. The result would not be neat, but in a slapdash fashion it ought to work.

Just the same, no R & D undertaking ever went smoothly, and this one labored under special difficulties. On a typical occasion—

"We'll want our secondary generator over here, I think, attached to this bench," Ray said. "Tote it for me, will you, Dyann?"

"All ve've done is vork, vork, vork," she sulked. "I vant to hunt monsters."

"Bring it, you lummox!"

Dyann glared but stooped above the massive machine and, between Ganymedean weight and Varannian muscles, staggered across the deck with it. Meanwhile Ray was checking electrical properties on an oscilloscope. Urushkidan was solving a differential equation while grumbling about heat and humidity and fanning himself with his ears. Elsewhere lay strewn a chaos of parts and tools.

"Damn!" the man exclaimed. "I hoped—but no, this piece of copper tube isn't right either. I need a resistance with so-and-so many ohms and such-and-such a capacitance, and nothing around seems to be modifiable for it."

"Specify your values," Urushkidan said.

Ray pawed through the litter around him, selected another object, and put it in his test circuit. "No, this won't do." He cast it across the room; it clanged against a bulkhead. "Look, if we can't find something, this project is stopped cold."

Having put down the generator, Dyann went forward. She returned with the boat's one and only frying pan. "Vill this maybe be right?" she asked innocently.

"Huh? Get out of my way!" Ray screamed.

"Okay," she answered, offended. "I go hunt monsters."

You know—passed through the man's head; and: *What's to lose?* He clipped the pan into the circuit. Its properties registered as nearly what he required. *If I cut the handle off*—Excited, he began to do that.

"Are you mad?" protested Urushkidan.

"Well, I don't like the idea of living off cold beans any better than you do," Ray retorted, "but consider the alternative." He rechecked the emasculated frying pan. "Ye-e-s, given a few adjustments elsewhere, this'll serve." Viciously: "Starward the course of human empire."

"Martian empire," Urushkidan corrected, "unless we decide it is beneat our dignity."

"It'll be Jovian empire if we don't escape. Okay, bulgebrain, what comes next?"

"How should I know? I habe not finished here. How do you expect me to tink in tis foul, tick air, wit no tobacco?"

Dyann clumped in from the forward cabin, attired in a spacesuit whose adjustability she strained to the limit. Its faceplate was still open. Her right hand clutched the rifle she had taken, her left her sword. "I saw monsters out there," she announced happily. "I am goin to hunt them."

"Oh, sure, sure," muttered Ray without really hearing. His attention was on a calculator. "Urushkidan, could you hurry it up a bit with that equation of yours? I really do need to know the exact resonant wave form before I can proceed." He glanced up. The Martian was trying to fill his pipe from the shreds and dot-

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tle in an ashtray. "Hey! Get busy!"

"Won't," said Urushkidan.

"By Heaven, you animated bagpipe, if you don't give me some decent cooperation for a change, I'll—I'll—"

"Up your rectifier."

The sound of an airlock valve closing snatched Ray out of his preoccupation. "Dyann?" he called. "Dyann. . . . Hey, she really is going outside."

"Apparently tere are monsters indeed," Urushkidan said.

Ray sprang into the forward cabin and peered through the nearest of its viewports. His heart stumbled. "Yes, a pair of gannydragons," he exclaimed. "Must've sensed our heat output—they could crack this hull wide open—"

"I will proceed wit te calculation," Urushkidan said uneasily.

—Dyann leaped from lock to ground. In the weird light and thin shriek of wind, the beasts seemed unreal. An Earthling would have compared them to long-legged crocodiles, ten meters from spiky tailtip to shovel jaws. "Thank you, Ormun," she said in her native language, aimed the rifle, and fired.

A dragon bellowed. In this atmosphere, the sound reached her as a squeak. The beast charged. She stood her ground and kept shooting.

A blow knocked her asprawl and sent the firearm from her grasp. She had forgotten the second dragon. Its tail whacked anew, and Dyann tumbled skyward. As she hit the rocks, both animals rushed her.

"*Haa-hai!*" she yelled, bounced to her feet, and sprang. She still had her sword, secured to her wrist by a loop of leather. Up she went, over the nearest head, and struck downward. Green ichor spurted forth. It froze immediately.

Dyann landed, got her back against a huge meteorite, and braced herself. The unhurt monster arrived, mouth agape. She hewed with a force that sang through her whole body. The terrible head flew off its neck. She barely jumped free of its still clashing teeth. The decapitated carcass staggered about, blundered against the companion animal, and started fighting.

Dyann circled warily around. The headless dragon collapsed after a while. The other turned about, noticed once more the heat-radiant boat, and lumbered in that direction. It had to be diverted. Dyann scrambled up on top of the meteorite, poised, and sprang. She landed astride the beast's neck.

It hooted and bucked. She tried to cut its head off also, but couldn't get a proper swing to her blade where she was. The injuries she inflicted must have done something to what passed for a nervous system, because the monster started galloping around in a wide circle. The violence of the motion was such that she dared not try to jump off, she could merely hang on.

Well-nigh an hour passed before the creature stopped, exhausted. Dyann slid to the ground, whirled her sword on high, and did away with this beast also. "Ho-ha!" she yelled joyously, retrieved her rifle, and skipped back to the boat.

—"Oh, Dyann, Dyann," Ray half sobbed when she was inside and her spacesuit off. "I thought sure you'd be killed—"

"It vas grand fun," she laughed. "Now let's make love."

"Huh?"

She felt of her backside and winced. "Me on top."

Ray retreated nervously. Urushkidan, standing in the entrance to the lab section, snickered and shut the door.

V.

The Ganymedean day drew to a close. Stars brightened in a darkened sky, save where Jupiter stood at half phase low to the south, mighty in its Joseph's coat of belts and zones. Weary, begrimed, and triumphant, Ray stepped back from his last job of adjustment. His gaze traveled fondly over the haywired mess that filled much of the forward cabin, all of the after cabin, and, via electrical conduits through the rad wall, most of the engine room.

"Done, I hope, I hope," he crooned. "My friends, we've opened a way to the universe."

Dyann nuzzled him. "You are too clever, my little darlin," she breathed. That rather spoiled the occasion for him. He'd grown fond of her—if nothing else, she was a magnificent companion, once she'd learned that there were limits to his strength as well as his available time—but she could not simper very successfully.

"I fear," said Urushkidan," "tat tis minor achiebement of mine will eclipse my true significance in te popular mind. Oh, well." He shrugged with his whole panoply of tentacles. "I can always use te money."

"Um-m-m, yeah, I haven't had a chance to think about that angle," Ray realized. "I'm safe

enough from Vanbrugh—you don't bring a man to court who's prevented a war and given Earth the galaxy—but by gosh, there's also a fortune in this gadget."

"Yes, I will pay you a reasonable fee for helping me patent it," Urushkidan said.

Ray started. "Huh?"

"I would also like your opinion on wheter to charge an exorbitant royalty or rely on a high bolume of sales at a lower price. You are better fitted to deal wit such crass matters."

"Wait one flinkin' minute," Ray snarled. "I had a share in this development too, you know."

Urushkidan uttered a nasty laugh. "Ah, but can you describe te specifications?"

"Uh—uh—" Ray stared at the jungle of apparatus and gulped. He'd had no time to keep systematic notes, and he lacked the Martian's photographic memory. By Einstein, he'd built the damned thing but he had no proper idea whatsoever of how!

"You couldn't have done it without me," he argued.

"Nor could an ancient farmer on Eart habe done witout his mules. Did he consider paying tem a salary on tat account?"

"But . . . you've already got more money than you know what to do with, you bloated capitalist. I happen to know you invested both your Nobel Prizes in mortgages and then foreclosed."

"And why not? Genius is neber properly rewarded unless it rewards itself. Speaking of tat, I habe had no fresh tobacco for an obscene stretch of days. Take us to te nearest cigar store."

"Yes," Dyann said with unwonted timidity, "it might be a good idea if ve tested vether this enyine vorks, no?"

"All right!" Ray shouted in fury. "Sit down. Secure yourselves." He did likewise in the pilot's chair. His fingers moved across the breadboarded control panel of the star drive. "Here goes nothing."

"Nothin," said Dyann after a silence, "is correct."

"Judas on a stick," Ray groaned. "What's the matter now?" He unharnessed and went to stare at the layout. Meters registered, indicators glowed, electrorotors hummed, exactly as they were supposed to; but the boat sat stolidly where she was.

"I told you not to use tose approximations." Urushkidan said.

Ray began to fiddle with settings. "I might have known this," he muttered bitterly. "I'll bet the first piece of flint that the first ape-man chipped didn't work right either."

Urushkidan shredded a piece of paper into the bowl of his pipe, to see if he could smoke it.

"Iukh-ia-ua!" Dyann called. "Is that a rocket flare?"

"Oh, no!" Ray hastened forward and stared. Against the night sky arced a long trail of flame. And another, and another—

"They've found us," he choked.

"Well," said Dyann, not uncheerfully, "ve tried hard, and ve vill go down fightin, and that vill get us admission to the Hall of Skulls." She reached out her arms. "Have ve got time first to make love?"

Urushkidan stroked his nose musingly. "Tallantyre," he said, "I habe an idea tat te trouble lies in te square-wabe generator. If we doubled te boltage across it—"

High in dusky heaven, the Jovian craft braked with a fury of jet-fires, swung about, and started their descent. Beneath them, vegetation crumbled to ash and ice exploded into vapor. An earthquake shudder grew and grew.

The boat's comset chimed. She was being signalled. Numbly, Ray switched on the transceiver. The lean hard features of Colonel Roshevsky-Feldkamp sprang into the screen.

"Uh . . . hello," Ray said.

"You will surrender yourselves immediately," the Jovian told him.

"We will? I mean . . . if we do, can we have safe conduct back to Earth?"

"Certainly not. But perhaps you will be allowed to live."

"About tat square-wabe generator—" Urushkidan saw that Ray wasn't listening, sighed, unstrapped himself, and crawled aft.

The first of the newcome craft sizzled to a landing. She was long and dark; guns reached from turrets like serpent heads. In the screen, Roshevsky-Feldkamp's image thrust forward till Ray had an idiotic desire to punch it. "You will surrender without resistance," the colonel said. "If not, you will suffer corporal punishment after your capture. Prolonged corporal punishment."

"Urushkidan vill die before he gives up," Dyann vowed.

"I will do noting of te sort," said the Martian. He had come to the machine he wanted. Experimentally, he twisted a knob.

The boat lifted off the ground.

"Well, well," Urushkidan murmured. "My intuition was correct."

"Stop!" Roshevsky-Feldkamp roared. "You

must not do that!"

The boat rose higher. His lips tightened. "Missile them," he ordered.

Ray scrambled back to the pilot's seat, flung himself down, and slammed the main drive switch hard over.

He felt no acceleration. Instead, he drifted weightless while Jupiter whizzed past the viewports.

The engine throbbed, the hull shivered—wasted energy, but what could you expect from an experimental model? Stars blazed in his sight. Struck by a thought, he cast a terrified glance at certain meters. Relief left him weak. Even surface flyers in the Jovian System were, necessarily, equipped with superb magnetohydrodynamic radiation screens. Those of this boat were operating well. Whatever else happened, he wouldn't fry.

The stars began to change color, going blue forward and red aft. Was he traveling so fast already?

"Vat planet is that?" Dyann pointed at a pale gray globe.

"I think—" Ray stared behind him. "I think it was Neptune."

The stars appeared to be changing position. They crawled away from bow and stern till they formed a kind of rainbow around the waist of the boat. Elsewhere was an utter black. *Optical aberration,* he understood. *And I'm seeing by Dopplered radio waves and X-rays. What happens when we pass the speed of light itself? No, we must have already—is this what it feels like, then?* The starbow of science fiction song and story pinched out into invisibility; he flew through total blindness. *If only we'd figured out some kind of speedometer.*

"Glorious, glorious!" chortled Urushkidan, rubbing his tentacles together as if he were foreclosing on yet another mortgage. "My teory is confirmed. Not tat it needs confirmation, but now eben te Eartlings must needs admit tat I I am always right. And how tey will habe to pay!"

Dyann's laughter rolled Homeric through the hull. "Ha, ve are free!" she bawled. "All the vorlds are ours to raid. Oh, vat fun it is to ride in a vun-force boat and slay!"

Ray reassembled his wits. They'd better slow down and turn around while they could still identify Sol. He made himself secure in his seat, studied the gauges, calculated what was necessary, set the controls, and pushed the master switch.

Nothing happened. The vessel kept on going.

"Hey!" the man wailed. "Who'! . . . Urushkidan, what's wrong? I can't stop accelerating!"

"Of course not," the Martian told him. "You must apply an exact counterfunction. Use te omega-wabe generator."

"Omega wave? What the hell is that?"

"Why, I told you—"

"You did not."

Ray and Urushkidan stared at each other. "It seems," the Martian said at length, "tat tere has been a certain failure of communication between us."

Weightlessness complicated everything. By the time that a braking system had been improvised, nobody knew where the boat had gotten to.

This was after a rather grim week. The travelers floated in the cabin and stared out at skies which, no matter how splendid, seemed totally foreign. Silence pressed inward with a might that would have been more impressive were it not contending against odors of old cooking and unwashed bodies.

"The trouble is my fault," Dyann said contritely. "If I had brought Ormun, she vould have looked after us."

"Let's hope she takes care of the Solar System," Ray said. "The Jovians aren't fools. When we left Ganymede, jetless, it must've been obvious we'd built the drive. They'll want to take action before we can give it to Earth."

"First," Urushkidan pointed out, "we habe to find Eart."

"It should be possible," Ray said. His tone lacked conviction. "We can't have gone completely out of our general part of the galaxy. Could those foggy patches yonder be the Magellanic Clouds? If they are, and if we can relate several bright stars to them—Rigel, for instance—we should be able to estimate roughly where we've come to."

"Bery well," Urushkidan replied, "which is Rigel?"

Ray held his peace.

"Maybe ve can find somevun who knows," Dyann suggested.

Ray imagined landing on a planet and asking a three-headed citizen, "Pardon me, could you tell me the way to Sol?" Whereupon the alien would answer, "Sorry, I'm a stranger here myself."

Never being intended for proper space trips, the boat carried no navigational or astronomical tables. Since she had passed close to Neptune, or whatever globe that was, she had presumably been more or less in the ecliptic plane.

Therefore some of the zodiacal constellations, those from which she had moved away, ought to be recognizable, though doubtless distorted. Ordinarily an untrained eye might have been unable to identify any pattern, so numerous are the stars visible in space. However, after a week without cleaning, the ports here were greasy and grimy enough to dim the light as much as Earth's atmosphere does.

Nevertheless Ray was baffled. "If I'd been a Boy Scout," he lamented, "I might know the skies. As is, all I can pick out are Orion and the Big Dipper, and I've no idea how they lie with respect to the zodiac or anything else." He gave Urushkidan an accusing glance. "You're the great astrophysicist. Can't you tell one star from another?"

"Certainly not," replied the Martian. "No astrophysicist eber looks at te stars if he can help it."

"Oh, you vant to find the con—con—star-pictures?" Dyann asked.

"Yes, we have to," Ray explained. "Familiar ones that we can steer by. You're quite a girl in your way, honey, but I do wish you were more of an intellectual."

"Vy, of course I know the heavens," she assured him. "How vould I ever find my vay around, huntin or raidin, othervise? And they are not very different in the Solar System. I learned your pictures for fun, vile I vas on Earth." She floated around the chamber from port to port, peering and muttering. "*Haa-ai*, yes, yonder are Kunatha the Qveen and Skalk the Consort . . . not much chanyed except—" she chuckled coarsely— "it is even more clear to see here than at home that they are begettin the Heir. You Earthlins take a section right out of the middle betveen those two and make a figure you call . . . m-m-m . . . ah, yes, Virgo."

"And you can tell us how the rest are arranged, and steer us till they have the right configurations?" Ray exclaimed. "Dyann, I love you!"

"Then let's get home fast," she beamed. "I vant to be on a planet." During the outward flight she had been discomfited at discovering the erotic importance of gravity.

"Control your optimism, Tallantyre," Urushkidan said dourly. "Trying to nabigate by eyeball alone, wit only a barbarian's information to go on, we may perhaps find te general galactic region we want, but tereafter we could cast about at random until our food is gone and we starbe to deat."

"Oh, I know the constellations close," Dyann said, "and I know how to take stellar measurements. It vill not be hard to make a few simple instruments, like for measurin angles accurately, that I can use."

"*You?*" the Martian screeched. "How in Nebukadashtabu can you have learned such tings?"

"Every noble in Kathantuma does, for to practice the—vat do you call it?—astroloyee. It is needful for plannin battles and ven to sow grain and marriage dates and everythin."

"Do you mean to say you are an . . . an . . . an astrologer?"

"Of course. I thought you vere too, but it seems you Solarians are more backvard than I supposed. Vould you like me to cast your horoscope?"

"Well," said Ray helplessly, "I guess it's up to you to pilot us back, Dyann."

"Sure," she laughed. "Anchors aveigh!"

Urushkidan retched. "Brought home by an astrologer. Te ignominy of it all."

Somehow Ray got his shipmates herded into seats, the vessel aimed according to Dyann's instructions, and the drive started. Given the modifications they had made, they could accelerate the whole distance and then stop almost instantly. The passage should not be long.

Except, of course, for the time-consuming nuisance of frequent halts en route to take navigational sights. Ray pondered this in the next couple of days, while he constructed the instruments Dyann required. That task was comparatively simple, demanding precise workmanship but no original thought to speak of. His engineering talent had free play; if nothing else, the problem took his attention from the zero-gee pigpen into which he was crammed.

Starlight was still around. It was merely Dopplered out of visible wavelengths and aberrated out of its proper direction. Both these effects were functions of the boat's speed—if "speed" was a permissible word in this case, which Urushkidan would noisily deny—and that in turn depended in a mathematically simple fashion on drive-pulse frequency and time. The main computer aboard, which controlled most systems, could easily add to its chores a program for reversing optical changes. There were several television pickups and receivers in the hold; normally, explorers on a Jovian moon would use them to observe a locale from a distance, but they could be adapted. . . .

After a pair of days more, Ray had installed in the forward cabin a gadget as uncouth to

behold as the star drive itself, but which showed, on a large screen, ambient space undistorted. It was adjustable for any direction. Playing with it, Dyann found a group of stars which made her smile. "See," she said, "now Avalla is takin shape. That is the Victorious Warrior Returnin Vith Captive Man Slung Across Her Saddlebow."

"No," said Ray, "that's Ursa Major. You Kathantumans have a wild imagination."

Seated in the pilot's chair—for she had soon mastered the controls of the star drive, as crude as they were—Dyann continued swinging the scanner around the heavens. Abruptly the screen blazed. Had radiance not been stopped down, the watchers might have been blinded. As was, they saw a vast, incandescent globe from which flames seethed millions of kilometers—"A blue giant sun," Urushkidan whispered. For once he was awed.

Dyann's eyes sparkled. "Let's play tag vith it," she said, and applied a sidewise vector. "Yippee!"

"Hey!" the Earthling yelped. "Stop!"

They whizzed among the flames, dodging, while Dyann roared out a battle chant. Urushkidan huddled in his chair, squinched his eyes shut, and muttered, "I am being serene. I am being serene." Ray tried to recollect his childhood prayers.

The star fell behind. "Okay, ve continue," Dyann said. "Vasn't that fun? Ray, darlin, after this trouble is over, ve vill take a cruise through the galaxy, yust the two of us."

Time passed. The heavens majestically altered their aspect. The conquerors of the light-years floated about, gazed forth at magnificence, and ate cold beans.

"Ve are in the yeneral sector ve seek," Dyann said. "I have been thinkin. First ve go to Varann."

"Your native planet?" asked Urushkidan. "Ridiculous! We are returning directly to Uttu."

"Ve may need help in the Solar System," she argued. "Ve have been gone for two or three veeks. Much can have happened, most of it not good."

"But . . . but what help do you expect to get from a bunch of . . . Centaurians?" Ray spluttered. "It isn't practical."

Dyann grinned. "How vill you stop me, sweetheart?"

He considered the muscles which stirred beneath her tawny skin. "Oh, well," he said, "I always wanted to see Varann anyway."

For a few hours the amazon kept busy with instruments and pilot board. Then, astoundingly to Ray, she found her goal. Waxing in the screen were two yellowish suns very much like Sol. Out of the stellar background, a telescope identified a dim red dwarf at a greater distance. Nowhere else in this part of space did such a trio exist.

"Home, oh, home," Dyann murmured almost tearfully.

"Not quite," Ray reminded her with a certain slight malice. "How are you going to find your planet?"

"Vell . . . vell, uh—" She scratched her ruddy head.

He took pity and thought aloud for her benefit. "Planets are in the plane of the two main stars. They'd have to be. If we put ourselves in that plane, at a point where Varann's sun, Alpha A, appears to be the right size, and swing in a circle of that radius, we should come pretty close. It has a good-sized moon, doesn't it, and its color is greenish-blue? Yes, we ought not to have trouble."

"You are so clever," Dyann sighed. "It is sexy. Yust you vait till ve have landed."

At a modest fraction of the speed of light, a mere few thousand kilometers per second, the boat paced out her path. Before long, Dyann was jubilating, "There ve are! Look ahead! Home! After all these years, home!"

"I would still like to know what we are supposed to do when we get tere," Urushkidan snorted.

"I told Ray vat," Dyann retorted. "You suit yourself."

The man said nothing, being preoccupied. Terminal maneuvers were necessarily his responsibility. They took his entire flying skill and then some. He could use the cosmic drive to shed a velocity which would else have caused his craft to explode on striking atmosphere. However, he could not thereafter use the conventional jets; they were never meant for thick air or strong gravity. Thus he must also come down on the new system, which was incredibly precarious when he didn't have a universeful of room for error around him. He must make a descent which was largely aerodynamic, in a boat hijacked from a moon where aerodynamics was a farce. Probably he would never have succeeded, were it not for experience he'd gained when he spent part of his legacy on rakish sports flyers.

Wind boomed outside. The sky turned from black and starry to blue and cloud-wreathed. Weight dragged at bodies. The hull bucked

and shuddered. Far below, landscape emerged. Ray had directed his approach by what he and Dyann remembered of maps—

"Kathantuma!" she shouted. "My own, my native land! See, I know her, yonder mountain, old Hastan herself. Yes, and that town, Mayta. Ve're here!"

VI.

When Ray had thumped the boat down onto the ground and his teeth had stopped rattling, he admitted to himself that this was pretty country. Around him waved rows of white-tasseled grain, wildflowers strewn among them in small brave splashes of color. Beyond the field he glimpsed a thatch-roofed rustic cottage and outbuildings, surrounded by trees whose foliage shone green-gold. In the opposite direction gleamed a river, crossed by a stone bridge which led to Mayta. The town seemed an overgrown village, timber houses snuggled about the granite walls of a castle whose turrets bore lacy spires from which banners flew. Elsewhere thereabouts, the land was devoted to pasture and woodlots, whose verdancy turned blue with distance till it faded into the snow-crowned heights which guarded this valley.

"Home," Dyann exulted. She unharnessed, rose, and stretched sinew by sinew, like a great cat. "And yust feel, darlin, ve got a decent up and down again."

"Uh—yeah." Ray had less pleasure. Fifty percent more pull than on Earth. . . . Urushkidan groaned and collapsed over his own seat like so much molasses.

"Come on out for some fresh air," Dyann said, "and ve vill find us a nice soft patch of turf."

She started to operate the airlock. He prevented her barely in time, and opened the valves the merest crack. Atmospheric pressure outside was considerably in excess of that within. No sense in getting a sinus headache; let the buildup be gradual. "Keep chewing and swallowing," he advised as the inward draught began to shrill.

"Vat? Vell, if you say so." Dyann reached for a hunk of cheese.

When at length they could go forth, it was into a freshness of cool breezes and the manifold scents of growing things, into trillings and chirpings from winged creatures that darted beneath sun-brilliant clouds, into air whose richness made every lungful heady as wine, so that aches and exhaustion vanished. "A-a-ah," Ray breathed. "You were right to make us stop here, sweetheart. What we need most after what we've been through is unspoiled nature, peace and quiet and—"

An arrow hummed past his ear and rang like a gong off the boat.

"Yowp!" Ray dived into the grain. Another arrow zipped where he had been. Dyann stood fast. After a moment, he ventured to raise himself, behind her back, and see what was happening.

From the rustic cottage, half a dozen women ran: a squat and scarred older one, and five tall and youthful who must be her daughters. They hadn't stopped to armor themselves with more than helmets and shields, but they did brandish swords and axes. The archer among them slung bow on shoulder as her companions closed in, and drew a dirk. Several man watched nervously from the farmyard.

"Ho-hai, saa, saa!" whooped Dyann. She herself was in full battle gear, that being the only clothing she had brought along. Her blade hissed free of its sheath. The matriarch charged. Dyann's blow was stopped by her shield, and her ax clanged grazingly off the newcomer's helmet. Dyann staggered. Her weapon fell from her grasp. The rest came to ring her in.

Dyann recovered. A karate-like kick to the elbow disarmed Mother. At once Dyann seized her by the waist, raised her on high, and threw her. Two of the girls went down beneath that mass. While they were trying to disentangle themselves, Dyann got under the guard of the next nearest and grappled.

Centaurian hospitality! flashed through Ray's mind.

A backhanded blow sent him over. Dazed, he looked up to see a daughter looming above. She smacked her lips, picked him up, and laid him across her shoulder. A sister tugged at him—by the hair—and said something which might have meant, "Now don't be greedy, dear; we go shares, remember?" They didn't seem worried about the rest, who were busy with Dyann and would obviously soon overcome her.

A trumpet blare and a thunder of hoofs interrupted. From the castle had come galloping a squad of armored ladies. Their mounts were the size and general shape of Percheron horses, though horned, hairless, and green. They halted at the fight and started to wield clubbed lances with fine impartiality. Combat broke up in a sullen fashion. From his upside-down position, Ray saw that none of the gashed and bruised femininity had suffered grave wounds. Yet that didn't seem to have

been for lack of trying.

The guttural, barking language of Kathantuma resounded around. A rider, perhaps the chief, pointed a mailed hand at Ray's captor and snapped an order. The girl protested, was overruled, and tossed him pettishly to the ground.

When he recovered full awareness, his head was on Dyann's knees and she was stroking him. "Poor little man," she murmured. "Ve play too rough for you, ha?"

"What . . . was that . . . all about?"

"Oh, this family say they vas mad because ve landed in their grainfield. That's a lie. They could have demanded compensation. I'm sure they really hoped to seize our boat and claim it as plunder. Luckily, the royal cavalry got here in time to stop them. Since ve are still alive, ve can file charges of assault if ve choose, because this is not a legal duellin ground. I think I vill, to teach a lesson. There must be law and order, you know."

"Yes," whispered Ray, "I know."

Two days later—Varannian days, a bit shorter than Terrestrial—Dyann gave a speech. She and her traveling companions were on a platform by the main gate of the castle, at the edge of the market square. She stood; they sat in leather chairs, along with Queen Hiltagar, the Mistress of Arms, the Keeper of the Stables, and similar dignitaries. Pikes of troopers and lances of mounted ladies hedged the muddy plaza, to maintain a degree of decorum among the two or three hundred who filled it. These were the free yeowomen of the surrounding district, whose approval of any important action was necessary because they would constitute the backbone of the army. In coarse, colorful tunics; body paint; and massive jewelry, they kept flourishing their weapons and beating their shields. To judge by Dyann's gratified expression, that counted as applause. Here and there circulated public entertainers, scantily-clad men with flowers twined into their hair and beards, who strummed harps, sang softly, and watched the proceedings out of liquid, timid eyes.

Ray wasn't sure what went on, nor did he care very much. A combination of heavy weight, heavier meals, reaction to the rigors of his journey, and Dyann's demands kept him chronically sleepy. This evening, a lot of the potent local wine had been added. He could barely focus on the crowd. Beside him, Urushkidan snored, Martian style, which sounds like firecrackers in an echo chamber.

Dyann ended her harangue at last. Both cheers and jeers lifted deafeningly. Long-winded arguments followed, which tended to degenerate into fist fights, until Ray himself dozed off.

He was shaken awake when sunset turned heaven sulfurous above the roofs, and gaped blearily around. The assembly was dispersing, most people headed for the taverns which comprised a large part of Mayta. Stiff and sore, he lurched to his feet. Dyann was more fresh and rosy than he felt he should be asked to tolerate.

"It has been decided," she rejoiced. "Ve have agreement. Now ve must call other meetins throughout the realm, but there is no doubt they vill follow this lead. Already ve can send envoys to Almarro and Kurin, for negotiatin alliance. How soon can a fleet leave, Ray?"

"Leave?" he bleated. "For where?"

"Vy, for Yupiter. To attack the Yovians. Veren't you listenin?"

"Huh?"

"No, I forgot, you don't know our language. Vell, don't trouble your pretty little head about such things. Come on back to the castle, and ve vill make love before dinner."

"But," stammered Ray, "but, but, but."

How do you equip a host of barbarians, still in the early Iron Age, to cross four and a third light-years of space for purposes of waging war on a nation armed to its nuclear-powered teeth?

A preliminary question, perhaps, is: Do you want to?

Ray did not, but found that he had scant choice in the matter. Affectionately but firmly, Dyann made him understand that men kept in their place and behaved as they were bidden.

She did go so far as to explain her reasoning. Centaurians were not stupid, or even crazy. What they were—on this continent of Varann, at least—was warlike. While in the Solar System she had almost automatically, but shrewdly, paid close heed to the military-political situation. Afterward she had plugged the capabilities of the cosmic drive into her assessment. Most of the Jovian naval strength was deployed widely through space. If the escape from Ganymede had, indeed, made the Confederation decide to lean hard on the Union while the balance of power remained in its favor, that ought to leave the giant planet quite thinly guarded, sufficient to intercept conventional attackers but not any who came in faster than light. A raid in force should, if

nothing else, result in the capture of Wotanopolis. No matter how austere by Terrestrial standards, that city was incredibly rich in Varannian terms. The raiders could complete their business and get home free, loaded with loot, covered with glory, and well supplied with captives. (As for the latter, there was hope of ransom, or possibly more hope of keeping them permanently as harem inmates. The polyandrous customs of this country worked hardship on many women.) While Earth might disown the action as piracy, it would doubtless not take punitive measures; everybody on the planet would be too relieved when an alarmed Confederation pulled its forces back to the Jovian moons.

Thus the calculation. Numerous ladies, Dyann foremost, recognized that it might prove disastrously wrong and the expedition end up as a cloud of incandescent gas or something like that. The idea didn't worry them much. If they fell audaciously, they would revel forever among the gods; and their names would ring in epic poetry while the world endured.

Failing to convince her otherwise, Ray sought out Urushkidan. The Martian, after an abortive attempt to steal the spaceboat and sneak off by himself, had been given a room high in a tower. Having adjusted a bit to the gravity, he sat amidst trophies of the hunt and covered a sheet of parchment with equations. *This place*, thought Ray, *has squids in the belfry*.

He poured forth his tale of woe. The Martian was indifferent. "What of it?" he said. "Tey may conceibably succeed, in which case we will doubtless be granted a bessel to trabel home in. If tey fail, ten it cannot be a matter of bery much time before te faster-tan-light engine is debeloped independently in te Solar System and somebody arribes here who can take us back."

"You don't understand," Ray informed him. "These buccaneers count on us as experts. They're bringing us along."

"Oh. Oh-oh! Tat is different. We better habe suitable armament." The Martian riffled through his papers. "Let me see. I tink equations 549 tro' 627 indicate—yes, here we are. It is possible to project te same type of dribing field as we use for transport in a beam which imparts a desired pseudobelocity bector to an extraneous object. Also . . . look here. Differentiation of tis equation shows tat it would be equally simple to break intranuclear bonds by trowing a selected type of particle into te state, and none oter. Te nucleus would ten separate, wit a net energy release regardless of where it lies on te binding curbe because of te altered potentials."

Ray regarded him in awe. "You," he breathed. "have just invented the tractor beam, the pressor beam, the disintegrator, and the all-fuel atomic generator."

"I habe? Is tere money in tem?"

The man went to work.

Headquartered hereabouts, the three expeditions from Sol had each left behind a considerable amount of supplies, equipment, and operating manuals. The idea had been to accumulate enough material for the establishment of a permanent scientific base—an idea that faster-than-light travel had now made obsolete. Most of this gear was stored in the local temple, where annual sacrifices were made to the digital computer. It took an involved theological argument to get it released. The point that Ormun must be rescued was conceded to be a good one, but not until the high priestess held an earnest private discussion with Dyann, and was hospitalized for a while thereafter, did the stuff become available.

Meanwhile Ray had been working on design and, with native assistants, some of whom knew a little English or Spanish, getting a team organized. Urushkidan's new principles proved almost dismayingly easy to apply. Everything that wasn't in the depot, native smiths could hammer out, once given the specs. Atomic engines came forth capable of burning anything whatsoever. After consulting the gods, Queen Hiltagar decreed that the fuel be coal. Nobles vied for the honorable job of stokers.

The engines not only drove ships, but powered weapons such as Urushkidan had made possible. It proved necessary for Ray to call on the Martian for more—radiation screens, artificial gravity (after experiment showed that too many Kathantumans got sick in free fall and barfed), faster-than-light communicators, et cetera. These developments might well have taken years, except that the Martian grew sufficiently exasperated at the interruptions that he tossed off a calculus by which the appropriate circuits could be designed in hours.

Given this much, the spacecraft proper could be built to quite low standards. They were mere hulks of hardwood, slapped together by carpenters in a matter of weeks, varnished and greased for air tightness. Since the crossing would be made in a few hours, air renewal systems weren't required; it sufficed to have tanks of compressed gas, with leakage to pre-

vent a buildup of excess carbon dioxide. Ray gave most of his attention to features like locks and viewports. Those had better not blow out! Still more did he concentrate on the drive circuits. They must be reliable during a trip to Sol and back, with an ample safety margin, but soon thereafter, they must fail. Not wishing the Centaurians ill, despite everything, he gave warning that this would happen, and was glad when it was accepted. Everybody knew that wire gave way after prolonged use, and here these ships were festooned with wires. The prospect of an amazon fleet batting about in the galaxy wheresoever it pleased had not been one that he could cheerfully contemplate.

Meanwhile the amazons themselves poured in, ten times as many as the thirty-odd hulls could hold, riding and hiking from the uttermost ends of Kathantuma and its neighbor queendoms to be in on the most gorgeous piece of banditry ever dreamed of. Only Dyann cared much about Ormun, who was just her personal joss, and only Ray gave a damn about Jupiter as a menace to Earth. However, the man was surprised at how quickly the chosen volunteers formed themselves into disciplined crews and how readily the officers of these developed the needful skills. It occurred to him at length that their way of life selected for alertness, adaptability, and—yes, though he hated to admit it—intelligence.

Three hectic months after his arrival on Varann, the fleet departed. After his labors, followed by Dyann's idea of a celebration, he used most of the travel time to catch a nap.

VII.

Enormous in the forward ports, banded with hues of cloud and storm that could have swallowed lesser worlds whole, diademmed with stars, Jupiter swelled to vision. Ray's heart bumped, his palms were cold and wet, his tongue dry. Somehow he pushed his way through a throng of armored women. Dyann sat at the controls of the flagship, her gaze intent upon the giant ahead.

"Listen," he pleaded amidst the racket of eager contralto voices, "let me at least call Earth and find out what's been happening. You need to know yourself."

"Okay, okay," she said. "But be qvick."

He settled himself before the comscreen and fiddled with knobs. Last year, the notion of virtually instantaneous talk across nearly a billion kilometers would have been sheer fantasy. He, though, was using a phase wave with unlimited speed to beam radio photons. It released them at a distance from Earth, which he had figured out on his pocket calculator, such that their front would reach a relay satellite with enough microwattage to be detected, amplified, and bucked on. The phone number attached to the signal was that of the Union's central public relations office. It was the only official one he knew where he could be sure to get a response without running a gantlet of secretaries.

The satellite beamed that reply back in the direction which its instruments had registered—with due allowance for planetary motions, of course. The Urushkidan-Tallantyre standing wave acquired the photons and passed them on. It also happened to acquire a commercial for Chef Quimby's Extra-Oleaginous Oleomargarine; and, when Ray received the information officer, that person resembled something seen through several meters of rippled water. At any rate, her image did. He hadn't had a chance to work the bugs out of his circuits.

"Who is calling, please?" she asked through an obbligato of *"Friends, in these perilous times, how better to keep up your strength for the cause of civilization than by a large, nutritious serving—"*

"This is Raymond Tallantyre, calling from the vicinity of Jupiter. I've just returned from Alpha Centauri on a spacecraft traveling faster than light."

"—deliciously vitaminized—"

"Sir," the Union spokesman said, "this is no time to be frivolous."

"—it's yum-yum GOOD—"

"Listen," Ray cried, "I want to give the technology to the Union. Stand by to record."

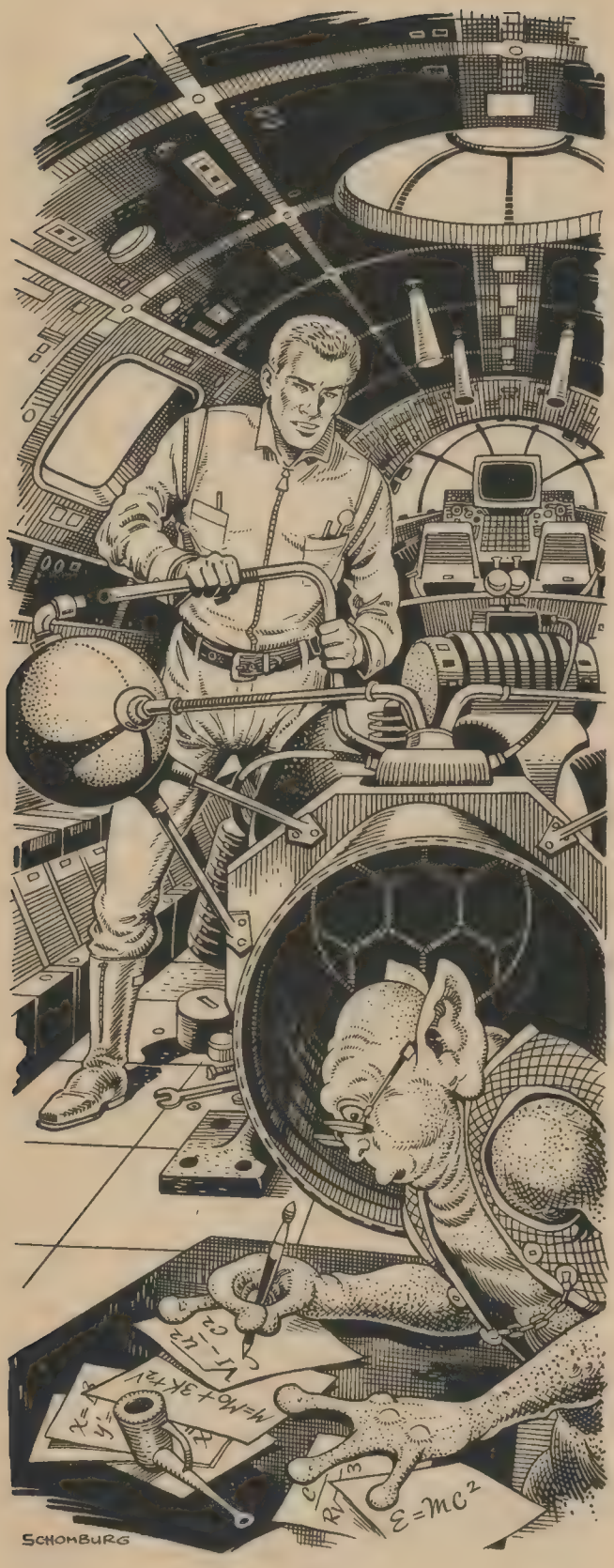
On the far side of Dyann, Urushkidan slithered to attention. "Hey!" he piped. "I neber said I'd gibe away—"

"Your behavior is in very poor taste," said the official, and switched off.

Presently Ray regained the wit to find a newcast. That wasn't hard; there were a lot of newcasts these days. He gathered that Jupiter had declared war "to assert racial rights long and cruelly denied." Three weeks ago, the Jovians had won a major naval engagement off Mars. They were not yet proceeding against Earth, but threatened to do it unless they got an armistice on terms which amounted to surrender. Without that, they would "regretfully take appropriate measures" against a planet whose defenses had become feeble indeed.

"Oh, gosh," said Ray.

"An armada like tat will stretch capabilities,"



Urushkidan opined. "Te Union has ships and bases elsewhere. It can cut Jobian supply lines—"

"Not if the Jovian strategy is to make a dash inward, put missile carriers in orbit, and pound poor old Earth into radioactive rubbish," the human mourned. "Meanwhile, those grunt-brains yonder won't believe I've got what's needed to save them."

"Would you beliebe tat, from a phone call?"

"Well . . . I guess not. . . . But damnation, this is different!"

"I see a moon disc ahead," Dyann interrupted, "and it looks like Ganymede. Out of the vay, you two. Ve're clearin for action."

The flagship, which had been a peaceful laboratory boat, came in through atmosphere with a whoop and a holler. After casting about for a while above desolation, she found the dome of Wotanopolis and stopped at hover. The rest of the fleet, still less agile, followed more leisurely.

Lacking spacesuits, the crew could not disembark and break out the battering rams, as had been proposed back on Varann. After studying the situation, Dyann proceeded to the main freight terminal. There she cut loose with her disintegrator beam. The ship-sized airlock disappeared in blue fire and flowing lava. Air streamed forth, ghost-white as water vapor froze. Even a hole so large would take hours to reduce pressure dangerously within a volume as great as that of the city. Dyann sailed on through, into a receiving chamber which was almost deserted now in wartime. She set down near the entrance, unharnessed, and leaped to her feet. "Everybody out!" she yelled in English, and added a Kathantuman exhortation. Her warriors bawled approval.

With fingers that shook, Ray buckled on helmet and cuirass and drew sword. Meanwhile, the rest of the barbarian fleet came in through the gap and clunked to rest, some on top of others. When all were inside, Urushkidan carried out his part of the mission by delicately melting the entry hole shut, to conserve atmosphere. He would stay behind, also, ready to open a passage for retreat. *How lucky can one being get?* thought Ray, as a swarm of warriors shoved him through the lock.

"Hoo, hah!" Dyann's sword shrieked on high. Her cohort poured after, whooping and bounding. The companion ships disgorged more. The abrupt change of pressure didn't seem to have given an ear ache to anybody except Ray. The racket of metal and girlish

voices made that nearly unendurable. He had no choice but to be swept along in the rush.

Through the resonant reaches of the chamber—up a long staircase, five steps at a time—out over a plaza above, in clangor and clamor—

A machine gun raved. Ray bellywhopped onto the flooring before he had identified the noise. A couple of Varannians tumbled, struck, though they couldn't be too badly wounded to judge from the swiftness with which they rolled out of the line of fire. Across the square, he saw the gun itself, where a corridor debouched. Several men in gray uniform crouched behind it. Whatever garrison the city possessed was reacting efficiently. Ray tried to dig a burrow.

He needn't have bothered. With lightning reflexes, under a weight that to them was gossamer, the invaders had already escaped further bullets, leaping sideways or straight up. Spears, darts, flung axes replied. An instant later, the Centaurians arrived in person. Ray experienced an actual moment of sympathy for the Jovians. None of them happened to get killed either, but they were in poor shape.

An enemy squad emerged from the adjacent corridor. Their rapid-fire rifles could have inflicted fearful damage on the crowded amazons—except that one lady, who knew something about such things, picked up the .50-caliber machine gun and operated it rather like a pistol. The squad scampered back out of sight.

"Hai-ai!" the horde shouted, with additions. Ray, who had acquired a smattering of Kathantuman, might have blushed at these had time allowed. As was, he was again borne off on the tide of assault.

He saw little of what followed. In this warren of hallways and apartments, combat became almost entirely hand-to-hand. That was just what suited the Varannians, and what Dyann had counted on.

He did glimpse her in action when she rounded a corner and found a hostile platoon. She sprang, swung her feet ahead of her while she flew, and knocked the wind out of two men. As she landed on them, her sword howled in an arc which left two or three more disabled. One who stood farther off tossed a grenade at her. She snatched it and threw it back. He managed to catch and return it, but was barely able to duck before she flung it again and it blew in a door behind him. While this game went on, Dyann rendered a foeman unconscious by a swordblow to his helmet, broke the nose of another with the pommel of her weapon, and kneed a third. Then several more Centaurians joined in.

The gang of them went on. They had nothing left to do here. Ray dodged among their victims, past the door which the grenade had obligingly opened, into the apartment beyond. Maybe he could hide under a bed.

A hoarse shout sent him spinning around. Two members of the platoon had recovered enough to stagger in pursuit of him. He would have cried, "Hail, Wilder!" and explained what a peaceful citizen he was. Unfortunately, he too wore barbarian helmet and cuirass.

Before he could raise his hands, a Jovian had lifted rifle and fired. The shot missed. Though the range was close, the man was shaken. Also, in his time on Varann Ray had inevitably developed some strength and quickness. He didn't exactly dodge the bullet, but he flinched fast. His wild sword-swing connected. The Jovian sank to the floor and got busy staunching a bad cut.

His companion charged, with a clubbed rifle that was perhaps empty. Ray turned to meet him and tripped on his own scabbard. He clattered to the floor and the enemy tripped over him. Ray climbed onto the fellow's back, removed his helmet, and beat his head up and down till he lay semi-conscious.

I've got to find someplace safe, Ray thought frantically. *Back to the ships, maybe?* He scuttled from the apartment, overleaped the human wreckage outside, and made haste.

Not far beyond, he came to an intersection. A tommy gun blast from the left nearly touched him. "No-o-o," he whimpered, and hit the deck once more.

A boot in his ribs gained his attention. "Get up!" he heard.

He reeled to obey. What he saw was like a physical blow. Elegantly black-clad men, the famous élite guard of the Leader, accompanied Martin Wilder himself. Beside the dictator stood none less than Colonel Roshevsky-Feldkamp—*in charge of local defense?* Ray wondered, and tried to stretch his arms higher.

"Tallantyre!" His old opponent glared at him for a time which took on characteristics of eternity. "So you are responsible."

"No, I'm not, so help me, no," Ray chattered.

"Who else could have brought these savages here?" The officer cuffed the Earthling; head wobbled on neck. "If it weren't for your hostage value, I'd shoot you immediately. But I had better defer that pleasure. March!"

The detachment proceeded wherever it was bound. That chanced to be down a mercantile corridor, on which shops fronted. Smashed glass and gutted displays showed that the Centaurians were already collecting souvenirs.

Wilder condescended to address the prisoner: "Never think that this criminal assault of yours has truly penetrated any part of us. We may have to retire temporarily from our capital, but already help has been summoned and is on its way, the entire navy bound here on a sacred mission of vengeance."

Will the Centaurians stop their looting in time to get clear of that? Ray thought in terror. *Somehow I doubt it.*

"I beg your pardon, glorious sir," interjected Roshevsky-Feldkamp, "but we really must make haste, before the invaders discover the emergency hangar we are bound for."

"No, no, that would never do," agreed the Leader.

"You must get aloft, glorious sir, to take charge of the counterattack."

"Yes, yes. I will strike a new medal. The Defense of the Racial Homeland Medal."

"You remember, of course, glorious sir, that we must not simply destroy the pirate spacecraft," Roshevsky-Feldkamp said. "We must capture them for examination. Afterward, the universe is ours."

"Hoo-hah!" rang between the walls. From a side passage staggered a band of Centaurians, weighted down with armloads of assorted loot. The guardsmen sprang into formation and brought their rifles up.

Something like an atomic bomb hit them from the rear. Ray learned afterward that Dyann Korlas and Queen Hiltagar had, between them, evolved a tactical doctrine that employed scouts to keep track of important hostile units and decoys to distract these.

What he witnessed at the time seemed utter confusion. A kind of maelstrom flung him against a wall and kept him busy dodging edged metal. He did glimpse Dyann herself as she waded into the thick of the fight, hewing, striking, kicking, a veritable incarnation of that Will to Conquer which the Symmetrists preached. Her companions wrought equal havoc. Ray took a minor part in the action. A guardsman reeled near him, tommy gun gripped, seeking a clear shot that wouldn't kill comrades. The Earthling plucked his sidearm from its holster and shot him—in the left buttock, because of recoil, but that sufficed.

Dyann saw. "Oh, how cute!" she caroled while she broke yet another head.

Combat soon ended. Most of the Jovians had simply been knocked galley west, and yielded with dazed meekness. Ray spied Wilder and Roshevsky-Feldkamp being prodded off by a squat, one-eyed, grizzled amazon with a silly smirk on her lips. They were doubtless destined for her harem—their decorations may have struck her fancy—and he couldn't think of two people he'd rather have it happen to.

Only . . . the whole enemy fleet could be arriving any minute—

What Ray did not know until later was that Urushkidan had prudently taken the original spaceboat outside and was using her beams to disintegrate those vessels and their missiles as they descended. Meanwhile he hummed an old Martian work song. There are times when even a philosopher must take measures.

VII.

Official banquets on Earth are notoriously dull. This one was no exception. That the war was over, that the Confederated Satellites would become the Jovian Republic and a respectable member of the World Union, that the stars were attainable: all seemed to call forth more long and dismal platitudes than ever.

Ray Tallantyre admitted to himself that the food and drink had been fine. However, there had been such a lot of both. He would have fallen asleep under the speeches had his shoes not pinched him. Thus he heard with surprise the president of his university describe what a remarkable student he had been. As a matter of fact, he'd damn near gotten expelled.

On his right, Urushkidan, crammed into a tuxedo tailored for his species, puffed a pipe and made calculations on the tablecloth. Left of the man, Dyann Korlas, her bronze braids wound about a plundered tiara, was stunning in a low-cut formal gown. The dagger at her waist was to set a new fashion. True, some confusion had arisen when she placed Ormun the Terrible at her plate and insisted that grace be said to the idol. Nevertheless—

"—unique scientific genius, whom his alma mater is pleased to honor with a doctorate of law—"

Dyann leaned close to whisper in Ray's ear: "Ven vill this end?"

"God knows," he answered as softly, "but I don't believe He's on the program."

"Ve have really had no time together since the campaign, have ve? Too many people, everyvun vantin us to do sometin or other.

Vat are your plans for ven you get a chance to be yourself?"

"Well, first I want to try and patent the cosmic drive before Urushkidan does. Afterward . . . I dunno."

"It vas fun vile it lasted, our romp, vasn't it?" Her smile held wistfulness. "Me, I must soon go back to Varann. I vant to do somethin vorthvile vith my life, like find a backvard area and carve me out a throne. You, though—Ray, you are too fine and beautiful for such rough vork. You belon here, in the bright lights and glamour, not amon a bunch of unruly vomen vere you can get hurt."

"Right," he said.

"I vill alvays remember you." Her hand dropped warm across his wrist. "Maybe someday ven ve are old, ve can meet again and bore the young people vith brags about our great days."

She glanced around. "But for now, darlin, if only ve could get avay from here by ourselves. I know a good bar not far off. It has rooms upstairs, too."

"Hm-m-m," he murmured. The prospect attracted. When she wasn't being a warrior, she was very female. "This calls for tactics. If we could sort of slump down in our chairs bit by bit, acting tired—which ought not to surprise anybody that notices—till we've gradually sunk out of sight, then we could crawl under the table and slip out that service door yonder. . . ."

As he did, Ray heard Urushkidan, called upon for a speech, begin a detailed exposition of his latest theory.

THROUGH TIME AND SPACE WITH FERDINAND FEGHOOT

by Grendel Briarton

Our Mr. Briarton claims to have an endless supply of these horrid puns . . .

One of history's best kept military secrets was how Ferdinand Feghoot helped Sir Robert Baden-Powell (who founded the Boy Scouts) to hold out during the seven-month siege of Mafeking in the Boer War.

"We must ally ourselves with South Africa's army ants," he told the commander. "They're highly intelligent, and their martial spirit is equal to ours. They'll be delighted."

Sir Robert was dubious, so Feghoot took him outside, where a large detachment of army ants was engaged in maneuvers.

"They're very rank conscious," he explained. "If we don't address the proper commander, they'll ignore us completely. Now watch the first platoon there—"

The head of the column advanced. Then abruptly the first ant turned left. When the second one followed him, Feghoot spoke up. "I say," he remarked, "why don't you lads go off and make life miserable for those Boers out there?"

At once, the ant halted. He waved his mandibles peremptorily. And the whole column marched off in the other direction.

"Astounding!" Sir Robert exclaimed. "Captain, how on earth did you know he was the platoon leader?"

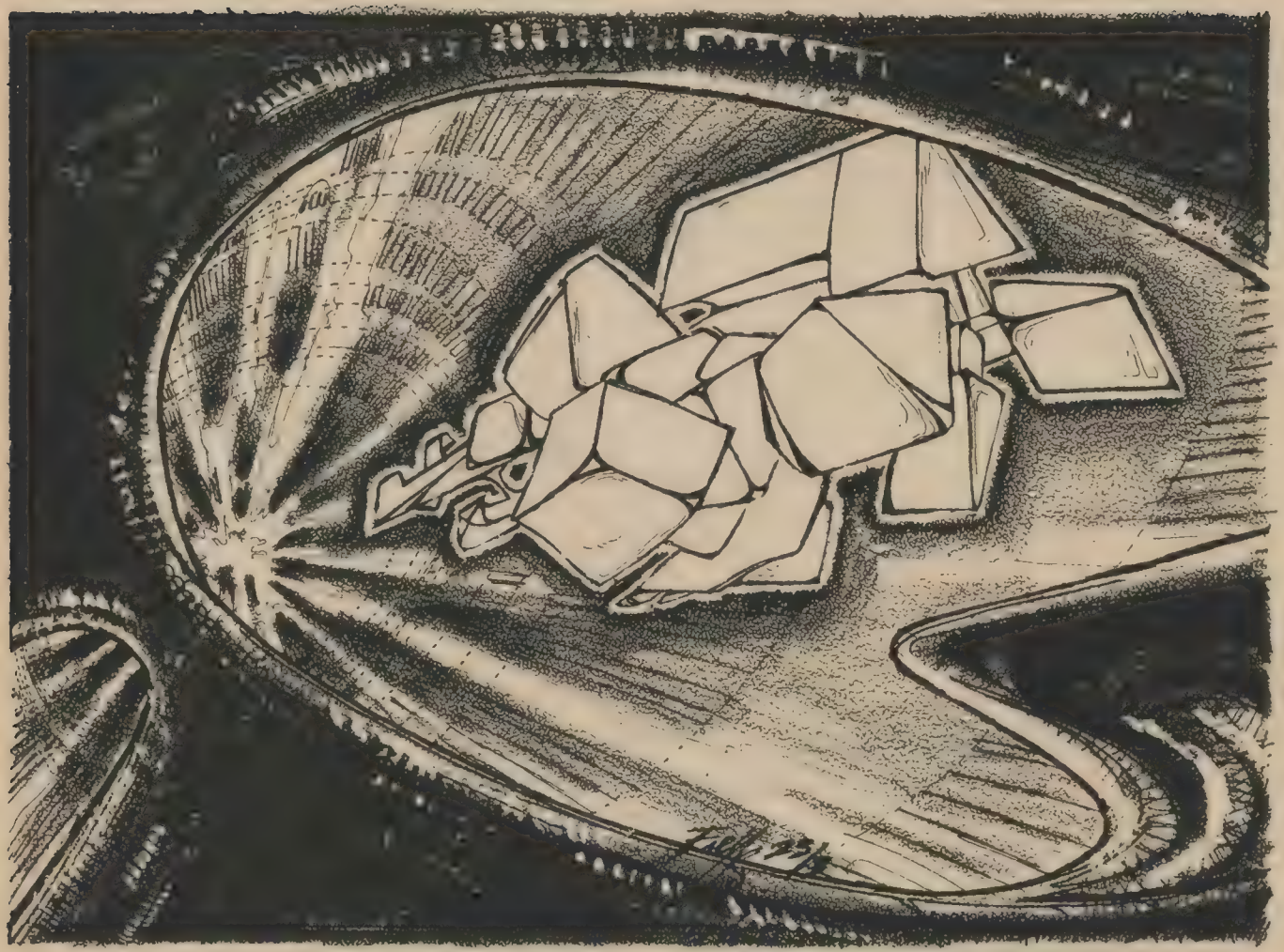
"It was simple, sir," said Ferdinand Feghoot. "I addressed myself to the second left turn ant."

BYSTANDER

by Alan Dean Foster

illustrated by Freff

Chapman was on board the rescue ship on its three-year-long interstellar trip just in case something unexpected happened along the way. Of course, something did.



Sleepy . . . he was so sleepy. . . .

Existence was proven by the depth of his dreaming, dreams of endless green plains across which he ran in slow motion. The dream faded. He clutched at it as it faded. Then it was gone.

He awoke.

Chapman sighed, waited motionless and logy until his vision had cleared. Revitalizing liquids stirred in his veins. There was the expected swabby-cotton taste in his mouth, as if he hadn't swallowed in a thousand years.

The clear domed lid of his suspension lounge slid back smoothly. He unlatched one side. Moving deliberately, with muscles groggy from several years' suspension, he eased himself into a sitting position on the lounge edge and stared around the empty pilot's pocket.

All the other seats were empty. He was the sole occupant of the gigantic bulb ship. Must be in orbit around Abraxis now, he mused. In an hour or so the endangered colony there could begin shuttling its members aboard. Then he could turn over responsibility to the colony leaders.

That was the second dream to be shattered.

"Position?"

"We are slightly more than five standard days out from Abraxis," replied the even voice of the ship's computer, as though it had last spoken to him only yesterday and not three years ago. Chapman considered this unexpected news, forced his so long unused tongue and palate to work.

"Then why have I been awakened now?" Not that a few days wakefulness would hurt him, but there was no reason for early revivification. No programmed reason, he reminded himself.

"We are presently being paralleled by a Dhabian," the ship explained, "and there . . . "

"Scope first." Chapman curtly interrupted the computer. He drew a globe of energized water from the lounge dispenser, squeezed it down his throat.

Obediently, the ship complied with the order. A small view-screen set into the emergency pilot's console flickered alight. Displayed on the screen was a massive cluster of red-orange blocks. The blocks were connected according to some elegantly inhuman design to form a ship. A Dhabian ship.

Earthmen had encountered the Dhabians over two decades ago. Since that time the relationship between the two races had been an uncertain one. Mankind's curiosity about the Dhabians was met with what was best described as cordial indifference on the aliens' part. Since the Dhabian vessels, for all their ungainly appearance, were faster than those of men, the aliens' privacy had thus far remained inviolate.

Whenever one of the infrequent encounters between human and Dhabian ships did occur, the Dhabians would sometimes communicate and sometimes not. They were never hostile, only uninterested. It was hinted that they had much of value to offer mankind. But neither pleading, threatening, nor a matching indifference had managed to inspire them to talk.

No one had ever seen an individual Dhabian. Chapman couldn't repress a slight thrill of excitement. Maybe he would be the first.

Yet the silent Dhabian was a known factor. The presence of one did not constitute a sufficient reason for revivification. He told his ship as much.

The ship proceeded to tell him about the new flare.

Flares were the reason for his hastily programmed mission. Astronomers had predicted several years ago that the Abraxis colony would have to be evacuated from its world at least temporarily because its sun was about to go through a period of brief but intense activity. That activity would produce enough high-energy radiation to kill any human on Abraxis's surface, or even slightly beneath it.

For the four to six months of dangerous stellar activity, the population would have to live aboard a rescue ship. This information being communicated to the proper authorities, a properly prepared and provisioned vessel was dispatched with barely enough time to arrive and take on the population before the onset of threatening activity.

What was the problem, then? Were the astronomers wrong? No, the ship informed him, the figures given were correct. The cycle of stellar outbursts was not beginning dangerously early. This new flare was an anomaly, a freak not accounted for in the earlier predictions. It would not endanger the colony, safe beneath its amorphous atmospheric shielding.

However, it would be severe enough to critically damage certain vital components and instruments. The bulb ship would be crippled beyond hope of performing its mission. Incidentally, Chapman would die.

"When?" the dazed pilot muttered.

"Twenty-four to forty-eight hours from now." The reply was quiet. The ship was sophisticated enough to take its pilot's emotional state into consideration and generate appropriate vocoder impulses in response.

Chapman requested more information. In the time remaining to him, the bulb ship could not flee far enough to escape the crippling burst of energy from the star. Nor could he reach the sheltering darkside of the colony world.

"Check computations." The ship did so, repeated what was already known to be inevitable. "Check again."

It was no good. Wishing had no effect on the realities of physics. Hoping failed to reduce either the critical distance to Abraxis or the number of energetic particles the star would generate. Chapman considered thoughtfully, analytically. The mission, then, would fail. The two thousand settlers, scientists, and technicians on the colony world would not be rescued in time. They would die. He would die a little sooner. And he was at once frightened and ashamed, because the last item of the two was the more important to him.

A light winked on on his console: an incoming call for position from the still distant world. An automatic relay would reply to personal curiosity.

"The Dhabian ship," he inquired. "Will it be able to escape the effects of the flare, based on

what we know of their abilities?"

A pause, then, "barring as yet undemonstrated speed, predictions are that it cannot."

He might have company, then. "Offer them the standard 'exchange of information request', ship." It would be interesting to learn if they were doomed, too. They seemed to be if his ship was right and they didn't possess some extraordinary particle shielding. Maybe they'd come to the Abraxis system to study the activity of its star prior to eruption and had been shocked and trapped by the same coming, unexpected burst of radiation which would finish him.

Anyway, it was something to do. The idea of returning to suspension, to await the end in ignorance, appalled him.

He did not really expect the alien to reply. He was surprised when a voice of oddly modulated tone whispered at him from the speaker. *"We will exchange with you, man."*

"This star will soon generate a burst of highly charged plasma which will be fatal to me." After a moment's thought, he added, "My ship will also be severely damaged."

"Information." The response was Dhabian-brief. *"No query?"*

"What will happen to you?"

"Will with us be the same as with you, man."

The first intimation of Dhabian mortality, Chapman mused. He felt no elation at the discovery. No one else would learn what he might discover here.

"There's no way you can survive? I thought your ships were fast."

"Not enough, But there may be a way." What seemed an uncertain pause before the Dhabian spoke again. *"You have not detected it?"*

"Detected what?" Chapman was more confused than excited.

"The onu."

"What the hell's an . . . ?" Chapman calmed himself. "Can you give me position?"

"Your figurings correspond not well, but from what we have learned," and the Dhabian shot some figures at him.

"Ship? What do they mean?"

"A moment, Chapman." He imagined he could hear the machine thinking . . . too long in suspension, he thought. "Using maximum amplification focused on region given by alien vessel, it is determined that a large though faint object is indeed located in the position suggested. Alien mass sensors must be more efficient/powerful than our own. Present position precludes visual identification of comet from this angle of observation."

"Comet? Question, ship. *Is it big enough* to provide adequate protection from the anticipated flare?"

"Yes, Chapman."

"Second question: is it big enough to provide shielding for *both* vessels?"

"Some delicate close-range maneuvering by each ship to prevent damage from the other's exhaust particles will be required. It can be done. But there is a difficulty."

Chapman's hopes scattered like children at playtime. "What difficulty?"

"Drive time to cometary umbra estimated at thirty-nine hours."

"We are going, man," the Dhabian informed him. *"Shall we prepare to adjust position to accomodate your own ship?"*

Chapman considered very quickly. Thirty-nine hours was stretching the upper limits of the time alloted before the expected stellar flare. In thirty-nine hours he could be a good deal further out than the comet's position. Yet his computer informed him he would still be well inside the fatal radius of the flare radiation.

It was an easy gamble to take.

"Yes, I'm trying for it too." The Dhabian apparently accepted this without replying.

"Ship, adjust position to place us behind the cometary nucleus. Keep heading of the Dhabian in mind."

"I will be careful, Chapman," the ship replied confidently.

The ensuing hours passed busily. Studying and recording the Dhabian vessel as it moved past and ahead of him at close range would provide a great deal that xenologists would find of value. It also kept his mind pretty much off his slim chances. After the twenty-four hour limit passed and he knew the flare could occur at any time he found himself working ever more intensely.

It was a large comet, all right. At least fifteen kilometers across the head. At thirty-two hours he had his closest glimpse of the Dhabian ship. It was eight hundred meters long, a hundred less than his own craft, but far more massive. It passed ahead of him, racing at its greater speed for the sheltering safety of the cometary bulk.

At thirty-five hours he permitted himself to hope a little. At thirty-six he was planning a full report to the Commission on his narrow escape.

At thirty-seven hours the ship told him he would be too late.

"Surface stellar activity is already showing

signs of impending eruption, Chapman. If local conditions do not change, we will arrive behind the cometary nucleus one hour twenty-two minutes ten seconds too late."

"What's the maximum we can take flare radiation for without sustaining irreparable damage to the ship?" Somewhat to his surprise he did not ask about himself.

"Ten and a half minutes."

That was it, then. Drowning, he'd been tossed a rope, and it had fallen short. He turned, let himself collapse in the chair opposite the main viewscreen. His head slumped forward, cradled in the crook of his right arm, to rest close by the cool metal.

He knew the fire would singe his wings, but it was so beautiful, so clean. Just a little closer, that was all, just a little closer. Through the quiet roar of the flames he thought he could hear the computer babbling precisely at him. Which was absurd. Computers did not talk to moths. Computers did not babble. He ignored the meaningless noises, dipped closer to the beckoning succubus. Fiery fingers touched his wings.

He woke up sweating.

And that was wrong. Very wrong. He couldn't have fallen asleep for more than a few hours, he felt. Even so, he had no business being awake and alive. He ought to be dead, snuffed out in a single incendiary *poof*, like a moth in a furnace. He blinked, looked around wildly.

"Ship! The flare, what . . . ?"

"Commencing countdown to arrival of first energetic particles," the computer said calmly. "Twenty, nineteen, eighteen. . . ."

Chapman stared dully at the viewscreen, tried to comprehend what he saw. To one side drifted an object that seemed assembled from the remnants of some ancient construct: the Dhabian ship, its quiescent drive glowing blue-white. Ahead was a dim green mass that as he watched concluded eclipsing the sun of Abraxis: the backside of the comet. In the reflected light from his own bulb ship it shone icy green and sharp. One moment it appeared solid, the next shifting and unstable.

"Four, three, two, one. . . ." The computer concluded. Chapman sucked in a startled breath.

The coma, the thick gaseous envelope which surrounded the cometary head, was shining so brilliantly it almost hurt him to look at it. The tenuous ribbons of gases and particles streaming back all around both ships took on a vibrant, purplish-red hue. In the storm raging off the surface of the star ahead, the streamers assumed a near-solid look, like the silken veil of a Spanish dancer.

While the view from several million miles away would have been even more impressive, there was something in the knowledge that he was *inside* the comet's tail which made him feel very small.

For five and a half hours the two ships rode the lee of the comet. Fiery colors danced around them. Devastating energy sheeted against the head of the comet, producing beauty instead of death.

Then the computer announced that the level of stellar radiation was dropping rapidly. Soon it fell to an acceptable level. At the same time the Dhabian ship began to move. It passed beyond and through the subdued but still dramatic cometary flow before Chapman thought to consider what had happened to him.

His ship could not have reached the safe position behind the comet by itself. Therefore the Dhabians had somehow helped him. Why?

"Initiate request for information, ship!"

After a moment, "They do not respond, Chapman." The alien vessel continued to move away.

"Try again!"

The computer did so, several times more before Chapman spoke directly into the pocket's pickup. "Dhabians! Why? Why save me? I owe

you. Two thousand and one owe you." Silence, as the great blocky ship continued to recede from him the screen. "Why don't you respond? Answer!"

A lilting, stilted voice. *"Multiple query inappropriate. Query elsewhere. Nothing here, man."*

Try as he would, Chapman was unable to elicit further communication from the alien.

Several weeks later, when the colony had been transferred easily and safely on board the ship and they were well out of the Abraxis system, it occurred to Chapman to ask hesitantly of his computer, "Ship, the Dhabians saved us and I don't know why. Do *you* know *how* they accelerated us in time to get us safely behind the comet?"

"Question inappropriate, Chapman." He frowned.

"Why?"

"No evidence to show Dhabian vessel affected our motion in any way."

He felt a little dizzy. Relief, he decided, and too many days on stimulants to stay awake. "What do you mean? If the Dhabians didn't adjust our velocity, then how did we get behind the nucleus?"

"Dhabians occupied fully with own maneuvers," came the reply. "Evidence indicates that comet shifted position to place us within its umbra. Dhabians had to slow, not accelerate, to match altered cometary position."

"You mean the Dhabians moved the *comet*?"

"Negative, Chapman. No evidence to support such hypothesis."

"But the comet changed position."

"Correct.

"That's impossible," he said with finality.

"Event occurred." The computer sounded slightly diffident.

Chapman considered. His eyes grew very wide. Then he raced through the ship until he located its present commander, colony-leader Otasu. The colony-leader was chatting with several other colony officials in the cramped confines of the pilot's pocket. He looked up uncertainly at Chapman's anxious entrance.

Chapman went immediately to the viewscreen. It showed only a view of star-speckled space and the slightly brighter distant spot of Abraxis' sun.

"We've got to go back, sir."

"Go back? We can't go back, Chapman, you know that." Poor fellow, he thought. Suspension does funny things to men. "Our sun's entered its eruption cycle. We'd all be fried."

Query elsewhere, the Dhabian had said before going finally silent, *Elsewhere, elsewhere* . . . where else had there been to query? The comet had changed position. . . .

"Fifteen hours," he mumbled, staring at the screen. "Fifteen hours."

"Fifteen hours for what?" prompted the colony-leader kindly, humoring the hyper emergency pilot. Chapman's face did not look up from the screen.

"I had fifteen hours during flare-time and I used it to make observations and notes about the Dhabian." He sounded numb.

"And very valuable observations, I'm told," acknowledged Otasu, trying his best to sound calming and approving.

"But you don't understand!" Chapman stared harder at the screen. The comet was back there, somewhere, moving about in the way of comets; and what did they know about comets, after all? Very little, very little.

"I spent fifteen hours studying the wrong alien. . . ."

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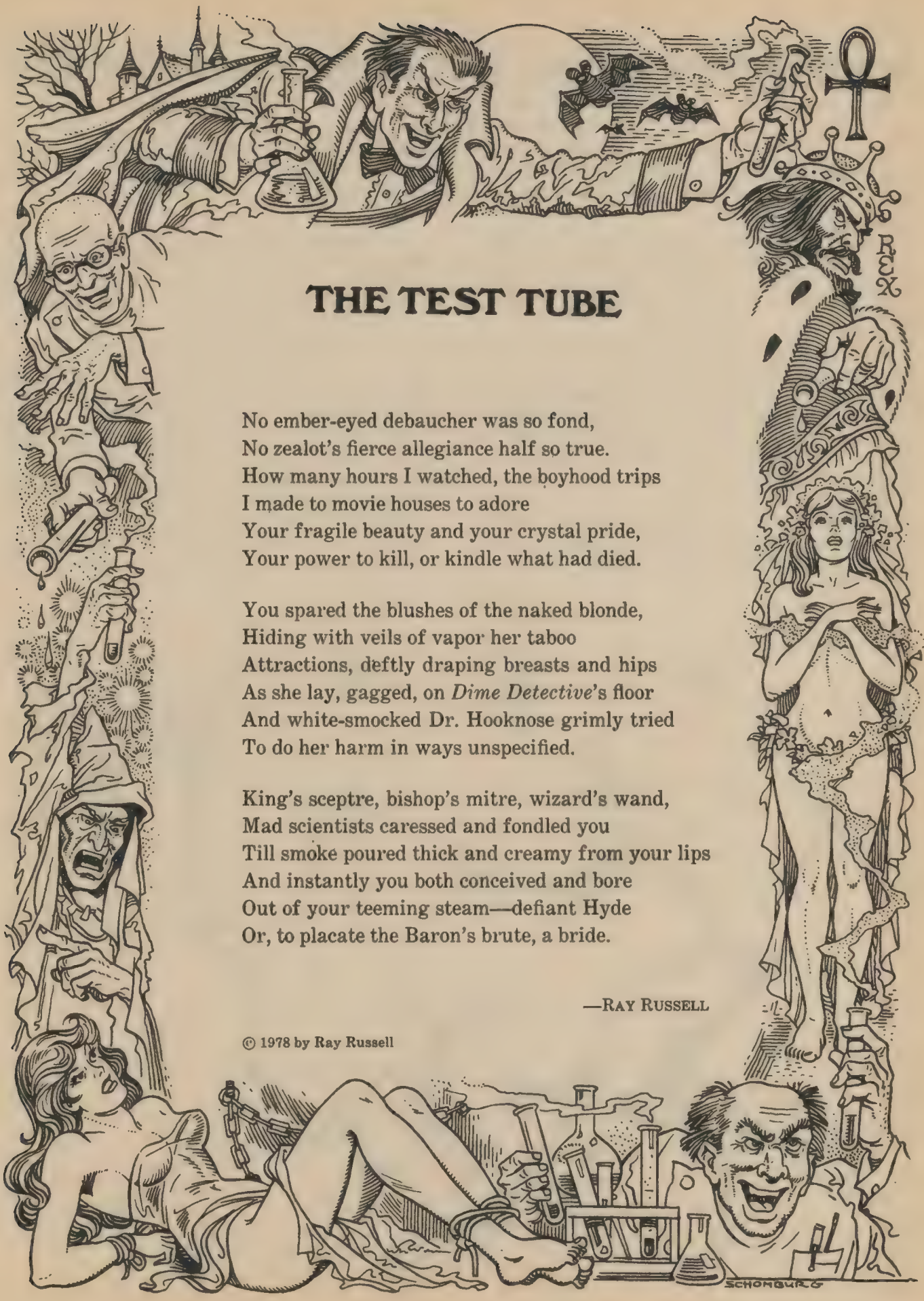


THE TEST TUBE

No ember-eyed debaucher was so fond,
No zealot's fierce allegiance half so true.
How many hours I watched, the boyhood trips
I made to movie houses to adore
Your fragile beauty and your crystal pride,
Your power to kill, or kindle what had died.

You spared the blushes of the naked blonde,
Hiding with veils of vapor her taboo
Attractions, deftly draping breasts and hips
As she lay, gagged, on *Dime Detective*'s floor
And white-smocked Dr. Hooknose grimly tried
To do her harm in ways unspecified.

King's sceptre, bishop's mitre, wizard's wand,
Mad scientists caressed and fondled you
Till smoke poured thick and creamy from your lips
And instantly you both conceived and bore
Out of your teeming steam—defiant Hyde
Or, to placate the Baron's brute, a bride.

—RAY RUSSELL

© 1978 by Ray Russell

WHERE NOW IS THY BROTHER, EPIMETHEUS?

by Jesse Peel

illustrated by Raul Capella

. . . a star-traveling future, a planet light-years from Earth, an extra-terrestrial martial art, and Prometheus' almost-forgotten brother . . .

Tal knew he shouldn't have come to the bar. He blamed it on force of habit, on old memories. Once, he'd been able to solve his problems that way, drunk or stoned or with a woman.

Not any longer. Not this problem. He stared into the depths of the thin, red ale as it grew warm in the still-full mug. That option wasn't open to him any more. He'd known it before he came—that it was not-right, but he had to try. He was almost certain it would fail, but he had to find out.

So now he knew.

He felt like a character from one of his favorite plays; tricked by ancient gods and circumstance, unable to change his fate.

He sighed. He'd been so deep in his thoughts, he'd ignored warnings of intrusion upon his solitide. A minor problem was flowering, a small thing. He knew if he stood now and left the bar, he could avoid it, but he hesitated. It was that knowing that mocked him. To be that certain, to *know*, that was the gift and curse that grated at his soul. But that was not the worst, oh no, not by far.

He could have cursed, but it would have been wasted energy. He was denied even that. But his momentary hesitation, his stubborn attempt to rebel had decided for him. It was too late to avoid the thing now.

Through the dim, yellow lights and shrouds of blue-gray smoke filling the bar, Tal watched

the Kreelian approach his table. The big mue's entire being shouted his purpose, presaged his arrival.

"Well," the mue said, sneering, "if it isn't the *alien*-lover!"

Tal didn't look up, struggling with himself. He could refuse to do it, refuse to play. He could withstand the compunction, he could hold himself in check.

"Didn't you *hear* me, toe-sucker? Maybe your ears are too full of Arezilah dung!"

Come on Tal, he thought. You can do it!

No. You can't.

His eyes came up slowly, to fix the mue's own. That look passed right through, as if the Kreelian was merely air.

"Go away," he said quietly.

The tone of his voice held power. It was a warning, alive with danger, filled with strength.

But the mue was drunk, and it made him angry instead of afraid. His smouldering rage flared. He took a short step back and shifted into a solid fighting stance. With the barest of pauses, he fired a fast-and-fluid round kick. It would crush Tal's skull when it landed.

In the beginning portion of the next half-second, Tal perceived the mue as others in the bar might. The Kreelian was humanoid, only one step removed from basic Terran stock. Two meters tall, a hundred and ten kilos heavy, the mue wore a freight handler's coverall, spotted with synlube. Judging from his motions, he was well trained. A dangerous being.

In the following portion of the half-second, Tal tuned to the vibrations that were the other's emotional content. There was hatred and insecurity, racism and fear, confidence in his ability—and joy, at the anticipation of causing pain to another.

During the third division of the half-second, Tal saw not with his eyes and brain, but with his mind.

He was one with the Wave.

The Wave. He felt it, touched it, tasted it, smelled it. He was it; it was he.

He understood the pattern, felt the disharmony caused by the mue's attack. The *wrongness* of it made him feel ill. He knew what must be done to correct it.

In the last portion of the half-second, Tal ducked easily under the heavy-booted foot, stood and pivoted behind the moving attacker. Gently, precisely, he pushed with one hand, barely touching the other's hip.

The big mue swung wildly, out-of-balance, and crashed onto the floor. He tried to recover, but the spilled mug of overturned ale ran under his boots, causing him to slip. He growled in anger, but couldn't stop his fall. His head smashed into the table, and he was knocked unconscious.

Seeing the problem corrected, Tal felt the ecstasy that came from being in accord with the Wave. Briefly, he allowed himself to drink it in, savoring it like fine spirits.

The Wave had returned to perfection.

Before the slumbering emotions of others in the bar who might be allies could awaken, Tal moved to the door, and was outside.

Not that there was any real danger. Even if all of the fifteen inside had attacked at once, he was confident. He was damned near invincible as a fighting man.

As a spy, it was what he'd been sent to learn. And now he knew.

He regretted learning it more than anything he'd ever done.

"I don't want the assignment. In fact, I refuse it."

"Look, Tal, you know I wouldn't ask, but this is vital—"

"They're all vital, Sig, every damned one of them. Regs says no more than three straight. I've done five. I'm due. Overdue."

"I know, I know. But you're the best we have—"

"Save it."

"Think of your—"

"And you can shove the 'duty to your world' crap too, Sig! I've been an op for ten years. I know which way the stars shine!"

"Please."

For a second, Tal was sure he'd been mistaken. Please? From Sig Thral, sub-chief of Offworld Espionage Operations? The man who'd spit into the eye of a Worldpresident? Please?

"All right, I'll listen. But that's all! I don't promise anything!"

A contact had been made, arrangements had been set. They had a rogue Arezilah lined up—for a lot of credit. All they needed was an expert in martial arts, somebody who could spot a fake. Somebody who could learn fast. The Arezilah was prepared to teach what he thought was a religious student the Set.

"The which?"

"It's some system of training. Supposedly what makes the pilot of an Arezilah Dreadnaught the equal of ten Terran Battleships."

"Sure. This I've got to see."

"You will. If you'll do it."

"Um. All right."

Sig's face lit up.

"But I want a bonus."

"I figured."

"There's a copy of Hamilton's "Mythology" on display at the World History Museum, an original print-on-paper. I want it."

"Impossible. That's a national treasure—"

"—and a small price to pay if I get what I'm supposed to. Surely you remember what the Arezilah did to us during the 'toid wars?"

"I remember," Sig growled.

"And I understand they are the only ones stopping us from taking the K-wayl system."

"How'd you know about—never mind!"

"Come on, Sig, Uplevels must want this bad." He smiled, confident of his reasoning.

Sig took a deep breath. "Do it, and I'll see that you get the book."

Damn! Tal grinned wider. An original Hamilton!

Such a book would give him the finest private collection of mythology and ancient legends on Earth. Any mission would be worth it, any ten missions.

A nagging doubt tugged at his mind, tapping with tiny fingers. Sig had agreed much too quickly for it to be easy. He'd have to be careful. Still, he felt great.

Here, Hercules, hold the world a while for me. I'll be glad to go fetch the golden apples for you.

Sure. No problem.

"I am Sull," the alien said, "your teacher."

Tal looked carefully at the other.

Nothing other than typical Arezilah. Just like dozens of others he'd seen since landing on Harvey's World, one of the four neutral planets. Although technically not at war, such places were the only places Terrans and Arezilah met.

Sull was less than a meter-and-a-half high, and probably wouldn't mass more than fifty kilos on this one-gee world. That was at least twenty-five less than Tal's own weight. His skin was bright pink, covered with tiny, fine scales, save for the pointed face. His eyes were large yellow globes, with an exopthalmic cast that bulged them past the flat sockets. His mouth was merely a green-rimmed slash across the bottom of his face—he had no nostrils. Three-fingered hands, three-toed feet. Sull wore no clothing, except for a black syntho-silk groin strap.

Hardly a formidable-looking opponent, even if well-trained. Tal knew a good big man usually could defeat a good little man, or whatever, all else being equal. Not that he expected too much from this little alien. It was probably just another trick.

"You have some training in the fighting arts?" Sull asked.

Tal nodded. "I have a blackpin in Oppugnate."

Sull moved his shoulders in a human-like shrug. Tal could see he had no concept of the style or ranking. Well. He'd find out soon enough.

"Utilize your system and attack me."

Tal nodded again. Typical training device. Invite an attack, then demonstrate a fancy way to block and counter. Made easier by knowing just when the attack was to come, and being set for it. Might as well play along. We're paying enough for this lesson.

His punch was deliberately slow, to give Sull a chance to look good at least once. To his surprise, the Arezilah merely moved aside, allowing the blow to pass slightly past his face.

"Surely you can do better? Try again."

All right. You had your chance. If you want to play. . . .

Tal's second and third punches were faster and better aimed. But they missed too.

Feeling slightly irritated, Tal followed this attack with a full-power sidekick, ending in a rake-claw and sweep.

Nothing. Not even very close.

So. This was it. Some kind of aikido. Well, he knew how to compensate for that. A good oppugnate man could fake out a good aikido man, force him to commit himself, and then take him. He'd done it before, and he was going to do it now.

This time, the attack series was the smoothest, fastest and hardest he could manage. It was a well-remembered and often-practiced triple-chop-and-punch routine, with two hand fakes and a fake elbow shot. To this, he added a hook kick. In the unlikely event that Sull managed to avoid the first series, the kick would get him. Ten years of training would see to that.

In the end, however, Tal knew he'd missed. He'd once struck his instructor with that series! He felt a slight pressure, the lightest of touches on his left shoulder, and his balanced attack suddenly turned into a fall. He tucked his head and managed to turn it into a roll, but he still hit the floor hard, bruising his back.

He finished the roll and came up into a defensive stance, facing Sull. The small alien had his arms folded, waiting.

"Not bad," Tal admitted. "Can you do that consistently?"

"Such as this can be done blindfolded."

Tal hadn't believed him, then.

Later, he did.

The sky outside the bar was a dirty gray-green, a light rain starting to fall. Tal didn't care. He walked in the deserted streets of the port city of Louis, ignoring the rain.

He knew the problem. But knowing it was not the same as solving it. It was so complex. It had all seemed so simple at first. But now . . .

Tal had been training for three of the planet's moon cycles, about six standard months. In that time, he'd learned more about close-combat than he had in all the years previously. He could never touch Sull, regardless of the speed of his attack, the number of fakes. Right now, if he were to go no further, he felt as if he was capable of handling any man in hand-to-hand fighting.

"Actually," Sull said, "you've learned almost nothing."

Tal's eyebrows shot up.

"All that has passed thus far has been merely . . . preparatory."

Those endless hours of sweat, being bounced around the featureless room like a free-fall cube were nothing? Gods. What was yet to come?

"So far, we have been working with the body. Now, we move to the important part—the mind."

Tal smiled. Going to throw in some kind of religious mumbo-jumbo, probably.

"Your brain is not formed like ours. We are uncertain if you will be able to learn what follows. We will try."

"We have learned from studies of . . . bodies we have obtained of the human brain. Psychoelectric testing shows vast portions of the brain which are . . . unused. Such waste in this highly developed and specialized organ is unnatural."

Tal maintained his silence in the quiet room, hearing only the voice of the Arezilah and the quiet hum of the air conditioner.

"It is our thought that these portions of the neurological system may be tuned to the Wave."

The Wave? "What is—?"

"It cannot be told, only shown—when you are ready."

"When will that be?"

"We don't know. Maybe never. We must teach you the preliminaries?"

"When do we begin?"

"Now."

Tal was made to sit in a kneeling position which was painfully uncomfortable after two minutes.

He was forced to hold it for an hour. Each time he faltered, Sull would tap him on the face. Not enough to cause pain, just enough to remind him.

The session seemed to last forever. When it was over, Sull wouldn't explain what it had been for.

Tal came to hate it each time he had to do it.

He did it twice daily, from then on.

The sparring sessions continued for hours at a time, with Tal always attacking, Sull always defending. The alien would allow the man to spend his energy in fruitless thrusting, never allowing a single strike to land.

When Tal thought he'd reached the limit of his endurance, Sull would force him to work harder.

He lost weight, his eyes sank into dark hollows. His sleep was restricted to three hours a night. Nearly every waking hour was taken up in exercises, mental and physical. Many of the things he practiced made no sense to him at all. Sull drove him like a work-slith, never slowing.

Of all the exercises, Tal hated one the most. The one-foot meditation, Sull called it. In this, he was made to stand balanced on one foot, eyes closed and mind open. His muscles cried out from the strain, but Sull would never let him rest until he had spent half an hour on each leg, twice a day.

The days ground on endlessly, the cycles lasted forever. On the rare occasions when he had a free moment, Tal was able to do nothing more than sit and stare, his mind and body worn, his very being tired.

"Don't use your eyes!" Sull admonished. "Use your mind!" "Reach for the feeling!"

"I'm trying!" Sweat ran down Tal's face, staining his already damp shirt.

"You try too hard! Don't push. Allow it to happen."

How can you try not to try? It was like saying 'try to relax'—it was a contradiction in terms. By trying, you *couldn't relax*!

Tal began to despair. His body and mind were driven to their limits, time and time again, to falter, to stumble. then Sull would make him go beyond exhaustion.

He wanted to quit, to go home, to the quiet of dead history, to his books and tapes. This was *hard*, harder than anything he'd ever done, harder than service training, harder than ten years of oppugnate.

He thought of the book he wanted, but it seemed so far away, so unreal. Nothing was worth this, nothing.

But there was that spark of stubborness that kept him hanging on. Maybe it was pride. Duty. Something.

Fate, maybe.

The streets of the city darkened, as the warm rain grew heavier. Fat drops pelted Tal, drenching him and the plascrete he walked upon.

The rain was part of the Wave, just, and in its place. He couldn't have changed it if he'd wanted to, and he didn't want to. Of course he didn't want to, it would disrupt the Wave, and he wouldn't do that.

He couldn't.

His anger made him scream, it made him stand and shout, flail his arms and sling his hands in impotent rage.

"It's no use! I can't! I can't!"

Sull sat watching, not speaking.

Tal looked at him, his rage growing, expanding so that it covered him, and then—it collapsed, unable to support its own weight.

He was too tired to be angry, too tired to care.

His mind stalled, and for a brief moment, he felt . . . nothing.

Sull stood and quickly walked to him. His hands flicked out, pink blurs, to slap cold-and-thin fingers onto Tal's head. With an incredible pressure, he *pushed*.

Tal screamed, and knew the Wave.

It flooded in on him, rolled over him, unstoppable, engulfing him, surrounding him, permeating his very cells, the heart of the universe, vaster than anything he'd ever known.

A flow that was one, yet billions. Color, yet invisible. Sound, but silent. Touch, taste, feel, the Wave was totality.

It was him and he was it and—

He blacked out, unable to stand it.

When he came to, Sull was sitting silently by him.

"Sull—I—it's—"

"Yes. I know." For the first time, Sull smiled.

After that, things were easier. He learned control, how to stem the flow, so his senses could contain it. He learned the intricate moves of the Set, the system that allowed him to work with the Wave, to change it. He learned of harmonies, notes, chords and melodies. He learned how to speak to the Wave, and how to listen.

He learned to love the Wave.

He gloried in the perfection of the flow, when it was as it should be. He knew the touch of a lover, infinitely more than any mere human could be.

And he learned of discord. Sull took him to places in the city where improper vibrations could be found. Teeth-on-slate sensations of imbalance, gut-tearing pain of disruption, headaches caused by those who fought the Wave, he learned of all these things.

He was shown how to correct them, within his own sphere of influence. He learned how to use the Wave to feel for impending disruption, like ripples on a pond.

Yes. Once he knew the Wave, things were simple, things were easier.

At first.

The storm was driving now, pounding at him. They gray sky had welled to dark purple, lit by flashes of crackling energy, smashed by heavy thunder.

As he walked, the memories crowded in on him, swirling into his consciousness, unhampered by the rain. He thought of Sull, his renegade teacher, and of their final meeting.

"You have learned well. You can now go back to your world . . . spy."

"You knew?"

Sull nodded, bright eyes gleaming.

"Then why did you teach me? Knowing that I came to obtain the Set as a weapon? Even a traitor—"

"I am no traitor!" Sull drew himself up straight. "I did my duty. I was instructed by my Elders to teach you."

Tal was at a loss. "Why?"

"We have nothing to fear. A master of the Wave is unbeatable, within his range. You must have learned this."

"Yes, of course. But now my people will have the Wave!"

Sull smiled again, the second Tal had seen. "True. You will be undefeatable, as we are. Just as we are."

"What does that mean?"

"It is simple. You can use the Wave to defend against anyone. But you cannot use it to attack."

Tal hadn't thought of it. Why, certainly, that was true. Sull was right. Why would anyone want to attack? That would create disharmony —no one who could use the Wave would do that. It would be . . . unthinkable.

Oh, my God.

There was more, worse. Tal could recognize the feeling, now that he reached for it. A master of the Wave couldn't attack—he knew that now—but neither could he stand by and permit disruption of the Wave. Not without trying to fix it.

Of course, that's why the Arezilah had shown him. It was a perfect defense, even more so than using the training they had.

But they'd done more than that. They had changed him, so that he couldn't watch imperfection any longer, he couldn't just do nothing.

If he went back to Earth and showed them what he knew, everybody would eventually become that way.

Was man ready for peace? Permanent, self-imposed peace? Even at the price of such as he could offer?

It would be so easy, to go home, to give men the strength of gods, the power of virtual invulnerability.

But they'd have to take the responsibility, too.

Just as the Arezilah had.

Gods, what have we done? Tal thought of the old legends, of Epimetheus, the forgotten brother of Prometheus the Fire-Giver. Epimetheus, who had created man, but who had also lacked the foresight to do the job right, stinting on the qualities which would make man better than an animal. He had gone to his brother Prometheus for help, and his wiser brother had finished the job for him.

Epimetheus, who had only the quality of hindsight, of afterthought.

A poor god, who was never able to see past the beginning of any project to the end.

Where now is thy brother, Epimetheus?

Who will save you now?

Out of the darkness of the rainstorm, tiny vibrations pushed at Tal. Dim shapes appeared behind the hummings, with dimmer purposes in mind.

It was the Kreelian mue, with others. There were several smaller mues, Stines. These creatures were smaller and faster, armed with spin-blades, the whirling knives throwing the water off, glinting dully in the storm's light flashes.

They circled him, the Kreelian approaching from the front.

"You won't have it so easy this time, Terry."

If only you knew, Tal thought. If only I could just stand quietly and let you kill me, so I wouldn't have to decide.

But already the flaws in the Wave stabbed at him. Flaws caused by these creatures, with death on their unaware minds.

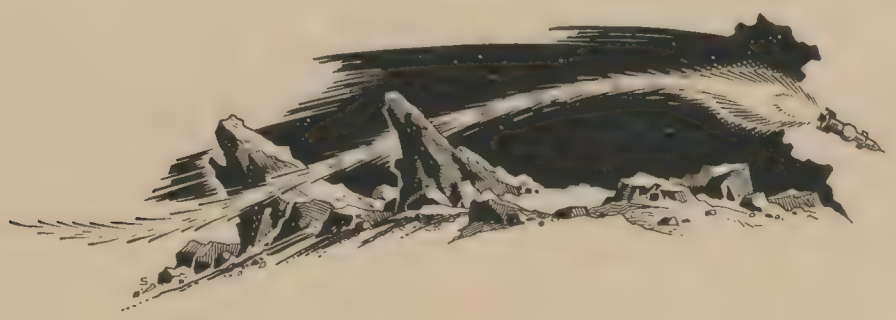
He would have to correct the flaws, of course.

As they moved in for him, another realization came to him, cold and undisputable. He made his decision.

Flaws in the Wave had to be corrected.

All of them.

Everywhere.



FAIR EXCHANGE?

By Isaac Asimov
illustrated by Freff

On Gilbert, and Sullivan, and time travel—and an exchange. Was it worth it?

I kept drifting in and out and every once in a while I'd hear a brief snatch of tune in my head.

The words came. "While noodles are baroned and earled, there's nothing for clever obscurity."

I was aware of light, then John Sylva's face bending over me. "Hello, Herb," its mouth said.

I didn't hear the words, but I saw the mouth forming them. I nodded and drifted out again.

It was dark when I drifted in once more. A nurse was fussing over me, but I lay quietly and she drifted away.

I was in a hospital, of course.

I wasn't surprised. John had warned me and I had taken the risk. I moved my legs, then my arms—very gently. They didn't hurt. They had sensation. My head throbbed but that was to be expected, too.

—While noodles are baroned and earled, there's nothing—

Thespis, I thought jubilantly. I had heard *Thespis.* I drifted off again.

It was dawn. There was the taste of orange juice on my lips. I sipped at the straw and was grateful.

Time machine!

John Sylva didn't like to have me call it that. Temporal transference, he called it.

I could hear him saying it and I luxuriated in it. My brain seemed perfectly normal. I tried to solve problems in my head and worked away, mentally, at the square root of five hundred and forty-three. Name the presidents in order! I *seemed* to be in good mental shape. Could I tell? I assured myself I could.

Brain damage had been the great worry, of course; and I don't think I'd have risked it except for *Thespis.* You'd have to be a Gilbert and Sullivan fanatic to understand that. I was, and so was Mary. We had met at a G & S club meeting, wooed each other through further meetings and while attending performances by the Village Light Opera Group. When we married at last, a chorus of our G & S friends sang "When a Merry Maiden Marries" from *The Gondoliers.*

My brain was normal. I was sure of it, and I stared out at the cold gray dawn that coated

the window and listened to my steadily strengthening memory of what had happened.

"Not a time machine," I heard John's voice saying in my mind. "That's an automobile you drive up and down the corridors of time, and it's theoretically impossible. What we have here is temporal transference. Minds can exert their influence across time. Or, rather, subatomic particles can, and if organized as complexly as in an advanced brain, their influence is multiplied to the point where it can be detected and, I think, used. If two minds are similar enough, they can resonate to the point where consciousness can shift back and forth across the time gap. Temporal transference."

"Can you actually control that?"

"I think so. I dare say each mind resonates with many others, and God knows what this would account for in terms of dreams, of feelings of *deja vu,* of sudden inspiration, and so on. But to make an actual transfer means an overriding resonance between two particular minds, and requires the proper amplification."

I was one of hundreds he tested. There was no use trying animals. Only the human brain set up a field strong enough to detect. Dolphins, perhaps, but how would one go about working with them?

"Just about everyone shows detectable resonance," said John. "You show a strong one, for instance, in one particular direction."

"With whom?" I asked, interested.

"Impossible to tell that, Herb," he said, "and we can't be sure how accurate our estimates of time and place are, but you seem to resonate with someone in London in 1871."

"In London in 1871?"

"Yes. We can't check our measurements through until we can subject someone to amplification great enough to effect a transfer, and frankly I don't expect fo find many volunteers."

"I'll volunteer," I said.

It took me some time to convince him I was serious. We were old friends, and he knew of my attachment to the G & S mystique, but I imagine he could not conceive its depth.

Mary could! She was as excited as I was.

I said to her, "Imagine the luck of the draw! *Thespis* was produced in London in 1871. If I suddenly found myself in that place at that time, I could *hear* it. I could—"

It was an overwhelming thought. *Thespis* was the first of the fourteen Gilbert and Sullivan operettas, a slight piece and certainly minor; but it *was* Gilbert and Sullivan just the same and the music was irretrievably lost.—All except one introductory chorus, which was used in *Pirates of Penzance* very successfully, and one ballad.

If I could hear it!

I said, enthusiastically, "And not just hear it. If I could lay my hands on the score and study it. If I could put a copy in a safe-deposit box and somehow get to open it now. If I could—"

Mary's eyes were gleaming but she did not lose her sense of the practical. "But could it be done? Granted that anything from *Thespis* would be the G & S find of the century, there's still no use having false hopes. If you got into

the mind of whoever it is in 1871, could you make him do what you want?"

"I could try," I said. "He would have to be much like me if our minds resonated so strongly over a time-gap of more than a century. He would have my tastes."

"But what if something happened to you?"

"Some goals are worth the risk," I said firmly, and she agreed. She wouldn't have been my Mary if she hadn't in this case.

Just the same I didn't tell her that John had warned me that brain damage was the great risk. "There's no way of predicting how great the risk of damage is," he said, "or if there's any at all, till we try it. I'd rather not try it with my best friend."

"Your best friend insists," I said, and signed all the releases that the lawyers of John's Temporal Transfer Foundation had set up.

But I took one precaution. I didn't tell Mary exactly when it would happen. If something went wrong, I didn't want her there at the time. She would soon be making her annual trek to Canada to visit her parents, and why not then?

"John won't be ready till the fall at the earliest," I said, and did my best to look disappointed.

Three days after Mary left, it was all ready.

I wasn't conscious of any nervousness at all, even when John said, "The sensations may be unpleasant."

I shrugged it off. "John," I said, "when I'm in England will I be able to do anything? Voluntarily, I mean?"

John said, "That's another question I can't answer categorically until you return—which will be automatic by the way. Even if I drop dead or the power fails, the resonance will eventually snap and you'll be back here. It's fail-safe because your physical body never leaves. You understand?"

"I understand." John was convinced that to relax me on this point would relieve tension and lower the chance of brain-damage. He had reassured me over and over. I said, "Will I be able to do anything?"

"I don't think so. You'll only be able to observe."

"Can I affect history?"

"That would introduce paradoxes, which is what makes the ordinary notion of time-travel impossible. You can observe, bring those observations back and change history from this point on—and that introduces no paradoxes."

"Better than nothing," I muttered.

"Of course," he said. "You'll be able to hear that operetta of yours, possibly, and that would be something."

Something, but not enough. I wasn't a trained musician; I couldn't reproduce every note.

I consoled myself with the hope that John was wrong or, perhaps, was lying. If there *were* the possibility of changing history the Office of Technological Assessment would not allow the experiments to continue. Surely, John had to maintain there was no such possibility or his research funds would be cut off.

They wheeled in my breakfast; and the nurse said, with synthetic cheer, "Well, you seem quite yourself now."

She had broken into my memories, and it wasn't much of a breakfast, but I was hungry enough for even the hot oatmeal to taste good.

It was a good sign, and in my mind a voice sang, "Well, well, that's the way of the world, and will be through all its futurity; while noodles are baroned and earled, there's nothing for clever obscurity."

I recognized it. It was the chorus to Mercury's solo from the first act of *Thespis*. Or at least I recognized the words. The music was new to me—but it was Sullivan. No question about it.

John Sylva arrived at 10 A.M. He said, "They called to tell me you're off the intravenous and you're still asking for me. How do you feel? You look pretty normal." His relief seemed limited. There was a worried look in his eye.

"I was asking for you?" I tried to remember.

"Constantly, while you were semi-conscious. I was here yesterday, but you weren't quite awake."

"I think I remember," I said, then brushed it aside. "Listen, John," I said. My voice was rather weak but I started from the beginning of Mercury's solo. "Oh, I'm the celestial drudge, From morning to night I must stop at it; On errands all day—" and carried it through to the end.

John nodded, having kept time as I sang. "Pretty," he said.

"Pretty!" It's Thespis. I attended three performances in London. I didn't even have to work to do it. My alter ego—a stock-broker, by the way, named Jeremy Bentford—did it on his own. I even tried to get a copy of the score. I managed to get Bentford to break into Sullivan's dressing room during the third performance. It didn't take much. It was his own urge, too; we were very much alike which is why we resonated, of course.

"Trouble is, he was caught and ejected. He

(Continued on page 63)

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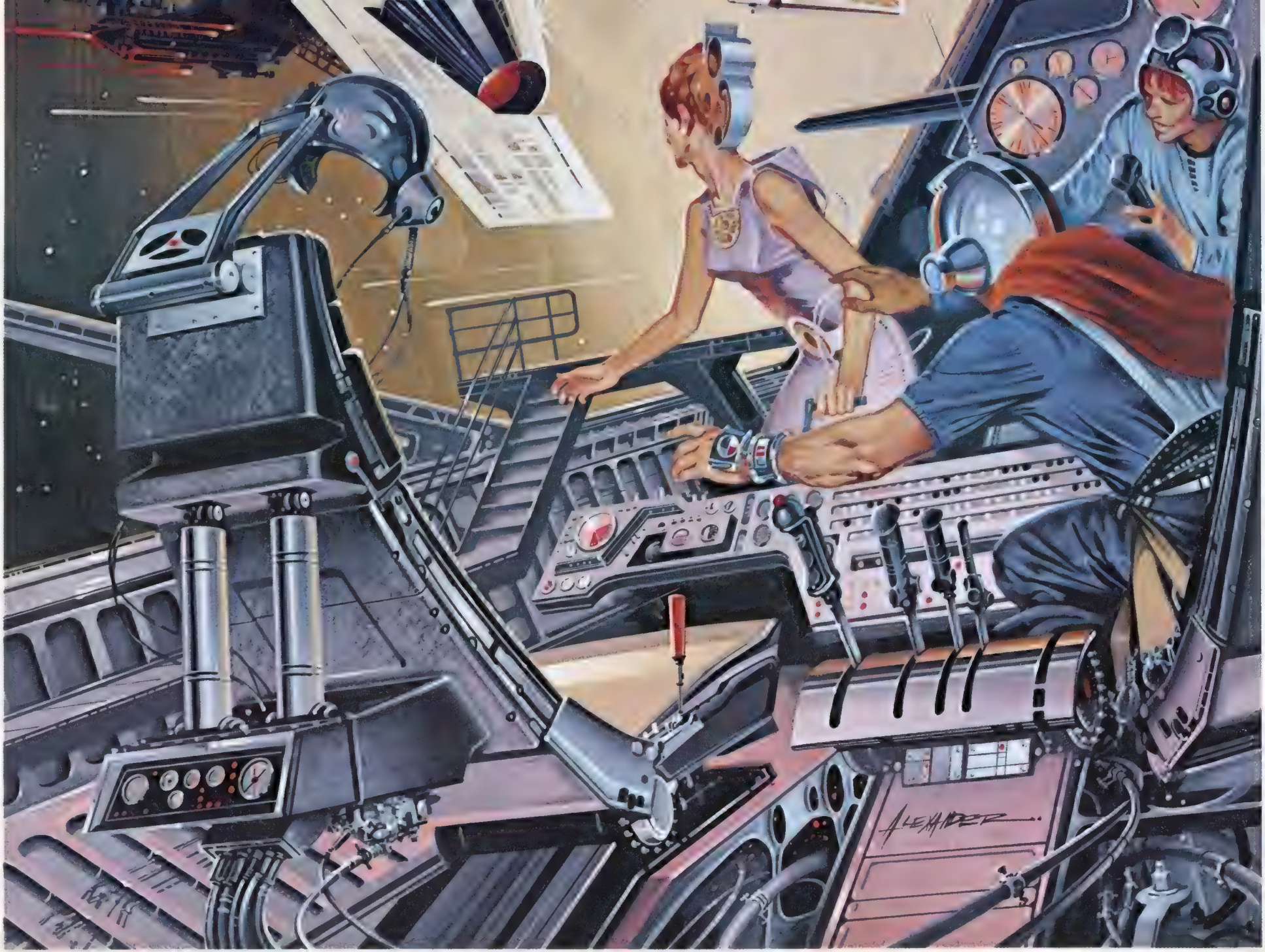

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actually had the score in his hand but couldn't hang on to it. So you're right. We can't change past history. —But we can change future history because I've got all the important tunes of *Thespis* right in my head."

John said, "What are you talking about, Herb?"

"England! 1871! For God's sake, John. Temporal transference!"

John nearly jumped. "Is *that* why you wanted to see me?"

"Yes, of course. How can you question that? Weren't you here all the time? My God, you sent me back in time. My mind, anyway."

John looked absolutely at sea. Wasn't I making sense? Had my brain been damaged after all? Is what I'm saying not what I think I am saying?

He said, "We talked about temporal transference a good deal. Yes, Herb. But—"

"But what?"

"It never worked. You remember that, don't you? It was a failure."

It was my turn to feel stupefied. "How can it be a failure? You sent me back."

John thought a while, then got up. "Let me get the doctor, Herb."

I tried to grasp his sleeve. "No, You did! How else do I know the tunes to *Thespis?* You don't think I'm making them up, do you? Do you think I'm capable of inventing the tune I just sang?"

But he had rung for the nurse, and he left. Eventually the doctor arrived and went through the ridiculous ritual of examination.

Why was John lying? Had he had trouble with the government over sending my mind back into time? Was he going to save his project by forcing me to lie too? Or representing me to be insane?

It was an upsetting and depressing thought. I had the music to *Thespis,* but could I prove that that was what it was? Would it not be much easier to suppose it a forgery? Would the Gilbert and Sullivan Society of New York be able to help out? There would have to be people there who could judge Sullivan's musical fingerprints, so to speak. Or would *anything* carry conviction if John remained firm in his denial?

By the next morning, I felt pugnacious about it. In fact, I thought of nothing else. I called John (or had the nurse call him, at any rate) and told him I had to see him again. And I forgot completely to ask him to bring my mail, which would have to include letters from Mary, among other things.

When John arrived, I said, as soon as the door opened and his face appeared in the opening, "John, I have the music to *Thespis.* I sang it to you. Do you deny I'm telling the truth about that?"

"No, of course not, Herb," he said placatingly. "I know the tunes, too."

That almost stopped me. I swallowed and said, "How can you—"

"Look, Herb, I understand. I can imagine that you would want the music to *Thespis* to be missing. But it isn't. You've got to face that. Look at this."

He held out a book with its soft covers in blue. The title was *Thespis,* lyrics by William Schwenk Gilbert, music by Arthur Sullivan.

I opened it and leafed through it in utter astonishment.

"Where did you get this?"

"In a music store near Lincoln Center. You can get it anywhere that sells the Gilbert and Sullivan scores."

I was silent for a while. Then I said, petulantly, "I want you to make a call for me."

"To whom?"

"To the president of the Gilbert and Sullivan Society."

"Certainly, if you'll give me his name and number."

"Ask him to come see me. Just as soon as he can. It's very important."

Again I forgot to ask about my mail. No. *Thespis* first.

Saul Reeve was in my room immediately after lunch, his gentle face and comfortable paunch an element of solidity I clung to with relief. He was virtually the personification of the Society, and I was mildly astonished that he wasn't wearing his Gilbert and Sullivan T-shirt.

He said, "I'm awfully glad you pulled through, Herb. The Society has been worried sick."

(Pulled through what? Worried over what? How did they know about the temporal transference experiment? If they did know, why was John lying and saying there hadn't been one?)

I said, sharply, "What's this about *Thespis?*"

"What's what about *Thespis?*"

"Does the music exist?"

Poor Saul is no actor. He knows everything there is to know about Gilbert and Sullivan; but if he knows anything else, he's fooled everyone. The look of astonishment on his face had to be the mark of a genuine, unfaked emotion.

He said, "Of course, it exists—but it nearly didn't, if that's what you mean."

"What do you mean, nearly."

"You know the story."

"Tell me, anyway. —*Tell* me!"

"Well, Sullivan was disgusted at the reception of the play and he wasn't going to publish the score. Then there was an attempted burglary. Some stockbroker tried to steal the score, actually had it in his hand when he was caught. Sullivan said that if the score was good enough to steal, it was good enough to publish. If it hadn't been for the stockbroker, we might not have the music today. —Not that it's popular. It's hardly ever performed. *You* know that."

I didn't listen after that.

—If it hadn't been for the stockbroker!

I *had* changed history, then.

Did that explain matters? Did even so small a thing as the publication of *Thespis* set up its ripples and create an alternate time-path, and was I in that alternate time-path?

Where did the ripples come from? Did the music matter so much? Did it inspire someone to do something or say something that would otherwise have been undone or unsaid? Or did the stockbroker's career take a turn as a result of apprehension for attempted burglary, and did that set up the ripples?

And did that somehow so alter events that John Sylva had never worked out the technology of temporal transference so that I was trapped forever in the new world?

I was alone by now. I hadn't even been conscious of Saul's leaving.

I shook my head. How was it possible? How could the *yes* of temporal transference become a *no*? John Sylva hadn't changed. Saul Reeve hadn't changed. How could there be so large a change without there being many small changes?

I rang for the nurse. "Can you get me a copy of the *Times* please. Today's, yesterday's, last week's. It doesn't matter."

Would she find an excuse not to bring one? Was there a conspiracy to keep me confused for some reason I couldn't fathom?

She brought one at once.

I looked at the date. It was four days after the temporal transference experiment.

The headlines seemed normal—President Carter—the mid-East crisis—satellite launchings.

I went from page to page, looking for discrepancies I could recognize. Senator Abzug had introduced a bill that would bring federal aid to a financially troubled New York City.

Senator Abzug?

Hadn't she lost the Democratic Senatorial primary to Patrick Moynihan in 1976?

I had changed history. I had saved *Thespis*, and in doing that I had somehow wiped out John's working out of temporal transference, and won the primary and election for Bella Abzug.

What other changes? Millions of trifling changes to trifling people that I wouldn't recognize? If I had a *Times* for this day from my world and could compare it with the *Times* I was holding, would even a single inch of the paper in any column on any page be exactly duplicated?

If that were so, what about my own life? I *felt* exactly the same. Of course, I could only remember my life from the other time-path. My own. In this one— I could have kids. My father could still be alive. I might be unemployed.

Now I remembered my mail, and I needed it. I rang for my nurse and had her call John Sylva again. He was to bring me my mail. He had a key to my apartment. (Did he in this time-path?) Particularly, he was to bring me the letters from Mary.

John never came, but long after dinner, the doctor came in. It was not entirely for the usual routine of prod and poke. He sat down and looked at me thoughtfully.

He said, "Mr. Sylva tells me you were under the impression that the music to the play, *Thespis*, was lost."

I was on my guard at once. They were not going to have me in a mental institution. I said, "Are you a Gilbert and Sullivan enthusiast, doctor?"

"Not an enthusiast, but I've seen several of the operettas; including, in fact, *Thespis*, about a year ago. Have you ever seen *Thespis*?"

I nodded my head, "I have," and I hummed Mercury's solo. I didn't think I had to tell him that the only times I had seen *Thespis* were in 1871.

He said, "Then you don't think the music to *Thespis* was lost?"

"Obviously not, since I know the music."

That stopped him. He cleared his throat and tried a new tack. "Mr. Sylva seems to think you were under the impression you had gone back in time—"

I felt like a matador withstanding the rush of the bull. I almost enjoyed it. "Private joke," I said.

"Joke?"

"Mr. Sylva and I used to discuss time travel."

"Still," said the doctor with a kind of heavy patience, "it was this particular matter you de-

cided to joke about? That the music to *Thespis* was lost?"

"Why not?"

"Do you have any reason for wishing the music did not exist?"

"No, of course not."

He stared at me thoughtfully. "You said you saw a production of Thespis. When?"

I shrugged. "I can't pinpoint it offhand. Must I?"

"Could it have been a year ago December?"

"Is that when you saw it, doctor?"

"Yes."

"It's very possible I saw it then."

The doctor said, "It was a very bad day when I saw it. Freezing rain. Does that help you remember?"

Was he trying to trap me? Would I be agreeing to nonsense if I pretended to remember that?

I said, "Doctor, I'm obviously not well and I won't pretend I have every detail of my memories clear. What do *you* remember?" That put the ball clearly in his court.

He said, "I understand that there was a full house that day despite the weather. Many went only because it *was* Thespis, a play very rarely performed, and therefore one that most had not heard. It was the only reason I had gone. If the music to *Thespis* were lost, and if it had been any other play, I probably would not have gone. Is that why you told Mr. Sylva when you regained consciousness that the music did not exist?"

"What do you mean?"

"That then *you* wouldn't have gone? Or been in the taxi coming back?"

"I don't understand you."

"But you were in an accident, sir."

"Are you telling me that that's why I'm here?" I stared at him, hostilely.

"No, sir. That was a year ago. It was your wife."

I felt the stab as though the word had been an ice-pick. I tried to struggle to one elbow but there was a nurse at my side, holding me. I hadn't seen her come in.

The doctor said, "Do you remember?"

What was I *supposed* to remember? What was the worst? I said, "My wife was killed?"

Deny it. Please deny it.

But the doctor's vague tension diminished. He sighed a little. "Then you do remember."

I stopped struggling. There was one flaw in the story. "Then why am *I* in the hospital? Now!"

"Then you *don't* remember?"

"Tell me."

He was going to make me face reality. *His* reality. *This* time-path's reality. I waited for his words.

He said, "You've been depressed ever since. You attempted suicide. We saved you. We will help you."

I didn't move. I didn't speak. Where could there be help?

I had changed history. I could never go back.

I had gained *Thespis.*

I had lost Mary.

THE STAINLESS STEEL RAT

by Harry Harrison
illustrated by Jodloman

Not even Slippery Jim diGriz can avert a Galaxy-wide war —or can he?

I.

Blodgett is a peaceful planet. The sun shines orangely, gentle breezes cool the brow, while the silent air is disturbed only slightly by the distant rumble of rockets from the spaceport. Very relaxing—but too much so for one like myself who must stay on guard, alert and aware at all times. And I admit that I was doing none of these things when the front door announcer bing-bonged. Hot water splattered my head and I was drowsy as a comatose cat.

"I'll get that," Angelina called out, loud enough to be heard over the splash of the shower. I gurgled an answer as I reluctantly turned the thing off and climbed out.

The drier blanketed me with warm air while the lotion mist tickled my nose. I hummed to myself with sybaritic joy, at peace with the world, naked as the day I was born—except of course for the few devices that I am never without. Voluntarily that is. Life had its joys and, as I appreciated my stalwart body and rugged face in the mirror, the touch of gray at the temples *did* add a distinguished note, I could think of nothing to worry about.

Other than the sudden angst that gripped me, chilling me to the bone. Was this a psi premonition? No, it was the ticking away of seconds. Angelina had been far too long at the door. Something was wrong.

I burst out into the hall and down it at a run. The house was empty. Then I was through the front door and bounding down the path like a pink gazelle, hopping desperately on one leg as I wrenched the pistol from my ankle holster, bulging my eyes in shock at the sight of my Angelina being bustled into a black ground car by two burly types. It pulled away and I risked a single shot at its tires, but could not fire again because there was traffic beyond.

Angelina! I ground my teeth with rage, fired more shots into the air so that the spectators who had been admiring my nude form now dived for cover. I managed to keep just enough peace of mind to memorize the numbers on the car.

Back in the house I thought briefly of calling the police, as any good citizen would, but since I have always been a very bad citizen I instantly dismissed the idea. Mighty is Slippery Jim diGriz in his wrath! Revenge would be

WANTS YOU!

mine! I turned on the compterm, mashed my thumbprint onto the ID plate, punched in my priority code, then the number of the kidnap car and asked for identification. Not a very complex task for a planetary computer and the answer appeared on the screen as soon as I hit the PRINT button.

When it did I dropped numbly into the chair. *They* had her.

This was far worse than I had imagined. Now, look, don't go thinking that I am a coward. Quite the opposite, I say humbly. You are looking at a survivor of a lifetime of crime—who has also survived another lifetime of crime-fighting after being drafted into the Special Corps, the elite galaxy-wide organization that uses crooks to catch crooks. That I have stayed relatively sound in wind and body all these years certainly speaks well of my reflexes, if not my intelligence. It was now going to take all of my years of experience to extract my dear wife from this nasty situation. Thought was needed, not action and, though it was still early in the day, I cracked out a bottle of 140 proof Old Thought Provoker and poured a generous amount to lubricate my synapses.

With the first sip came the realization that the boys would have to be in on this one. Angelina and I, doting parents, had labored to shield them from the cruel facts of the world, but that time was over. Their graduation from school was still a few days away, but I was sure that this could be accelerated with the correct persuasion in the proper quarters. Strange to think they were almost out of their teens already; how the years slip by. Their mother—*Angelina, my kidnapped treasure!*—was as beautiful as ever. As for myself, I may be older but I am no wiser. The gray in my hair has not affected the lust for gold in my heart.

I did not waste a moment as I mumbled to myself nostalgically. Throwing on my clothes, kicking on my boots, stowing away about my person a number of lethal and technological devices, I dropped into the garage even as I closed the last closure. My bright red Firebom 8000 exploded into the drive, as the door snapped open, and hurtled down the road, scattering the dull citizens of the peaceful planet of Blodgett in all directions. The only reason we had settled on this bucolic world was to be near the boys while they were at school. I would be delighted to leave the place without a backward glance. Not only had it all the boredom of an agricultural planet, it was also infested by an octopus-like bureaucracy. Since it was centrally located among a number of star systems and boasted a salubrious climate, the bureaucrats and League administrators had moved in to create a secondary economy of government offices. I preferred the farmers.

The farms gave way to trees as I burned down the road, then to the barren rock hills.

There was a chill in the air at this altitude that went with the somber stone cliffs and, when I whisked around the final turn, the damp morning perfectly matched the rough finish of the high stone wall ahead. As the spiked portcullis rumbled slowly upward I admired, not for the first time, the letters hacked into the black slab of steel by the entrance.

DORSKY
MILITARY BOARDING SCHOOL
AND PENITENTIARY

That my dear twins had to be incarcerated here! As a father I felt concern; as a citizen I suppose it was a blessing. What I thought was just good spirits in the lads, the rest of the world tended to frown upon. Before coming here they had been expelled from a total of 214 schools. Three of these schools had burned down under mysterious circumstances; another had blown up. I had never believed that the mass suicide attempt of all the senior masters at another school had anything to do with my boys, but vicious tongues will wag. In any case they had finally met their match, if not their master, in old Colonel Dorsky. After being forcefully retired from the military he had opened this school and put his years of service, experience, and sadism to work. My boys had reluctantly gained an education, served their term, and in a few days would face the graduating ceremonies and parole. Only now things would have to be accelerated just a little bit.

As always I reluctantly surrendered my weapons, was X-rayed and spy-beamed, locked through the multiple automatic doors and released into the inner quad. Dispirited figures shuffled by, beaten down by the school's foolproof and escapeproof system. But there ahead, crossing the ferroconcrete artificial grass, were two upright and brisk figures, unbent by any despair. I whistled shrilly and they dropped their books and ran up to greet me warmly. After which I rose slowly to my feet and dusted myself off—then proved that an old dog can still teach the pups a trick or two. They laughed as they rubbed their sore spots and stood up again. They were a bit shorter than I was, taking after their mother there, but soundly muscled and handsome as gods. Many a girl's father would be out buying a shotgun after they were released from school.

"What was that bit with the arm and elbow, Dad?" James asked.

"Explanations can wait. I am here to accelerate your graduation because something not too nice has happened to your mother."

Their grins vanished on the instant and they leaned forward alertly, drinking in every word as I explained what I had seen, nodding in agreement.

"Right then," Bolivar said. "We go stir up old Dirty Dorsky and get out of here . . ."

". . . and do something about it," James added, finishing the sentence. They did this often, many times thinking as one.

We marched. In step, at a good time of 120 paces to the minute. Through the great hall and past all the skeletons in chains, up the main staircase, splashing through the water running constantly down it, and into the Head's office.

"You can't go in there," his secretary-bodyguard said, surging to his feet, 200 kilos of trained fighting flesh. We scarcely slowed and only broke step going over his unconscious body. Dorsky looked up growling when we came through the door, gun ready in his fist.

"Put it away," I told him. "It is an emergency and I have come for my sons a few days early. Would you be so kind as to give them their graduation certificates and expiration of term-served papers."

"Go to hell. No exceptions. Get out of here," he suggested.

I smiled at the unswerving gun and decided that explanation would be more fruitful than violence.

"This is a bit of an emergency. My wife, the boys' mother, was arrested this morning and taken away."

"It was due to happen. You lead undisciplined lives. Now get out."

"Listen you dough-faced, moron-brained, military dinosaur, I came here for neither your sympathy nor malice. If this was an ordinary arrest the arrestees would have been unconscious soon after opening the door. Detectives, cops, military police, customs agents, none of those could stand before the wrath of my sweet Angelina."

"Well?" he said, puzzled, but gun barrel still ready.

"She went along quietly in order to give me time. Time that I will need. Because I checked the license plate numbers and these thugs were agents for . . ." I took a deep breath, ". . . agents for Interstellar Internal and External Revenue."

"The income tax men," he breathed and his eyes glowed redly. The gun vanished. "James diGriz, Bolivar diGriz; step forward. Accept

these graduation certificates as tokens of your reluctant completion of all courses and of time served here. You are now alumni of Dorsky Military Boarding School and Penitentiary and I hope you will, like the other graduates, remember us with a little curse before retiring each night. I would shake your hands except my bones are getting brittle and I am laying off the hand-to-hand combat. Go forth with your father and join him in the battle against evil and strike a blow for me as well."

That was all there was to it. A minute later we were out in the sunshine and climbing into the car. The boys left their childish possessions behind them in the school and entered the world of adult responsibility.

"They won't hurt Mom, will they?" James asked. "They won't live long if they do," Bolivar said, and I distinctly heard his teeth grinding together.

"No, of course not. Getting her release will be easy enough, as long as we can get to the records in time."

"What records?" Bolivar asked. "And why did Dirty Dorsky help so easily? That's not like him."

"It *is* like him because under that veneer of stupidity, violence, and military sadism he is still roughly human like the rest of us. And like us, he regards the tax man as the natural enemy."

"I don't understand," James said, then grabbed the handhold as we snarled around a tight bend just a micrometre from the edge of the vertical drop.

"Unhappily you will," I told him. "Your lives have been sheltered up until now, in that you have been spending but not earning. Soon you will be earning like the rest of us and, with the arrival of your first credit, sweat of your palms and brow, the tax man will arrive as well, swooping in ever smaller circles, screaming shrilly, until he perches on your shoulder and with yellow beak bites most of the money from your grasp."

"You sure turn a nice simile, Dad."

"It's true, it's true," I muttered, swinging into the motorway and roaring into the fast lane. "Big government means big bureaucracy which means big taxes; there seems to be no way out of it. Once you're involved in the system you are trapped, and you end by paying more and more taxes. Your mother and I have a little nest egg put aside for investing for your future, money earned before you lads were born."

"Money stolen before we were born," Bolivar

said. "Profits from illegal operations on a dozen worlds."

"We didn't!"

"You did, Dad," James said. "We broke into enough files and records to find out just where all the money came from."

"Those days are behind us!"

"We hope not!" both boys said in unison. "What would the galaxy be like without a few stainless steel rats to stir them up? We have heard your bedtime lectures about how bank robbery helps the economy. It gives the bored police something to do, the newspapers something to print, the population something to read about, the insurers something to pay off. It is a boost to the economy and keeps the money in circulation. It is the work of a philanthropist."

"No! I did not raise my boys to be crooks."

"You didn't?"

"Well, maybe to be *good* crooks. To take only from those who can afford it; to injure no one; to be kind, courteous, friendly, and irreverent. To be crooked just long enough to be enlisted in the Special Corps where you can serve mankind best by tracking down the real crooks."

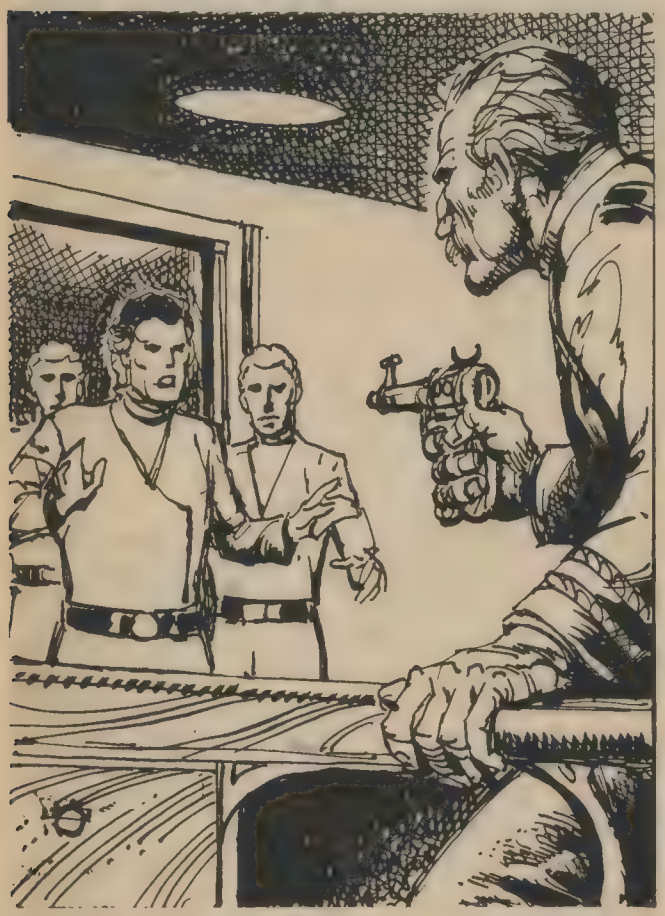
"And the real crooks we are tracking down

now?"

"The income tax people! As long as your mother and I were stealing money and spending it there were no problems. But as soon as we took our hard-earned salaries in the Corps and invested them we ran afoul of the tax people. We made a few minor bookkeeping errors. . . ."

"Like not reporting any of your profits?" James asked innocently.

"Yes, that's the sort of thing. By hindsight it was rather foolish. We should have gone back to robbing banks. So now we are enmeshed in their coils; playing their games; getting involved in court actions, audits, lawyers, fines, jail terms—the whole mess. There is only one answer, one final solution. That is why your mother went away calmly with these financial vampires. To leave me free to cut the gordian knot and get us out of this mess."



"What will we have to do?" they asked in eager unison.

"Destroy all of our tax records in their files, that's what. And end up broke—but free and happy."

II.

We sat in the darkened car, and I nibbled nervously at my fingernails. "It's no good," I said at last. "I am racked with guilt. I cannot steer two innocents into a life of crime."

There were snorts, indicating strong emotions of some kind, from the back seat. Then the doors were hurled open and slammed shut again just as quickly, and I looked up in shocked surprise as they both stamped away down the night-filled street. Had I driven them away? Would they attempt to do the job on their own and bungle it? What disasters lay ahead? I was fumbling with the door handle, trying to make my mind up, when the footsteps grew louder again, returning. I stepped out to meet them when they came back, faces grim and empty of humor.

"My name is James," James said. "And this is my brother, Bolivar. We are adults under law having passed the age of eighteen. We can legally drink, smoke, curse, and chase girls. We can also, if we choose, decide to break any law or laws of any planet knowing full well that if we are caught in crime we will have to pay the penalty. We have heard a rumor from a relative that you, crooked Slippery Jim, are about to break the law in a singularly good cause and we want to sign up for the job. What do you say, Dad?"

What could I say? Was that a lump in the old rat's throat, a tear forming in his rodent eye? I hoped not; emotion and crime do not mix.

"Right," I snapped, in my best imitation of a drill sergeant with piles. "You're enlisted. Follow instructions, ask questions only if the instructions are unclear, otherwise do what I do, do what I say. Agreed?"

"Agreed!" they chorused.

"Then put these items into your pockets. They are bits of equipment which are sure to come in handy. Are you wearing your fingerprint gloves?" They raised their hands, which glistened slightly in the streetlamp light. "Good. You will be happy to hear that you will be leaving the prints of the mayor of this city, as well as those of the chief of police. That should add a note of interest to an otherwise confusing situation. Now, do you know where we are going? Of course not. It's a large building around the corner which you cannot see from here. The area HQ of the IIER, Interstellar Internal and External Revenue. In there are records of all their larcenous endeavors. . . ."

"You mean *yours*, don't you, Dad?"

"Larceny is in the eye of the beholder, my sons. They take a dim view of my activities, while I in turn look with loathing on their taking ways. Tonight we attempt to even the score. We do not approach the IIER building directly because it has many defenses since they know they are unloved. Instead we enter the building around this corner which, not by chance have I selected it, has a rear that adjoins our target building."

We walked while I talked and both boys recoiled a bit at the lights and crowds ahead. Sirens screamed as official black groundcars drew up, television cameras churned away, searchlights fanned across the sky. I smiled at their hesitation and patted their backs as we walked.

"Now isn't that a lovely diversion? Who would consider breaking and entering in a setting like this? The opening night, the premier performance of the new opera *Cohoneighs in the Fire*."

"But we'll need tickets . . ."

"Bought from a scalper this afternoon at outrageous prices. Here we go."

We pushed through the crowd, surrendered our tickets, then made our way to the uppermost circle. The opera would be hard to hear from here, not that I had any intention of listening to the bucolic mooing and lowing in any case. There were other advantages to the top of the building. We went to the bar first and I had a refreshing beer and was cheered to see that the lads ordered only nonalcóholic drinks. I was not so elated at other of their activities. Leaning close to Bolivar I took his arm lightly—then clamped down a tight index finger on the nerve that paralyzed his hand.

"Exceedingly naughty," I said as the diamond bracelet fell to the carpet from his numb fingers. I tapped an exceedingly porcine woman on the shoulder and pointed it out when she turned. "I beg your pardon, madam. But did that bracelet slip from your wrist? It did? No, let me. No, my pleasure indeed, thank you, and may we bless you as well for all eternity." I then turned about and slipped a steely gaze into James's ribs. He raised his hands in the sign of peace.

"I get the message, Dad. Sorry. Just keeping in practice. For extra practice I put the wallet back in the gent's pocket as soon as I saw Bolivar rubbing his numb arm."

"That's fine. But no more. We are on a serious mission tonight and want no petty crime to jeopardize our position. There, that's the last buzzer. Down drinks and away we go."

"To our seats?"

"Definitely not. To the gents."

We each occupied a cubicle, standing on the seats so our legs would not reveal our occupation of the premises, and waited until all the footsteps had retreated and the last receptacle had been flushed. We awaited even longer until the first wailing notes of the opera assaulted our ears. The rush of running water had been far more musical.

"Here we go," I said, and we did.

A wet eye on the end of a damp tendril watched them leave. The tendril projected from the waste basket. The tendril was attached to a body that belonged in the waste basket—or even more loathsome surroundings. It was bumpy, gnarled, ugly, clawed. Not nice.

"You seem to know your way around here pretty well," Bolivar said as we went through a locked door marked PRIVATE and along a dank corridor.

"When I bought the tickets this afternoon I let myself in and ran a quick survey. Here we are."

I let the lads disconnect the burglar alarms themselves, good practice, and was chuffed to see that they needed no instruction. They even put a few drops of friction-freer in the tracks before slipping the window silently open. We gazed out into the night, at the dark form of a building a good five meters away.

"Is that it?" Bolivar asked.

"If it is—how do we get there?" James said.

"It is—and this is how." I slipped the gun-like object from my inside pocket and held it up by the looped and heavy handle. "It has no name since I designed and made it myself. When the trigger is pulled this projectile—shaped like a tiny plumber's friend—is hurled forth with great velocity. It trails behind a thin strand of almost-unbreakable monomolecular filament. What happens then?, you might ask; and I will be happy to tell. The shock of firing switches on a massive-charge battery in the projectile that expends all of its power in fifteen seconds. But during that time a magnetic field is created here on the projectile's tip that has enough gauss to hold up a thousand kilo load. Simple, isn't it?"

"Are you sure *you're* not simple, Dad?" Bolivar asked, worried. "How can you be sure of hitting a piece of steel in the dark with that thing?"

"For two reasons, O scoffing son. I discov-

ered earlier today that each story of that building has a steel cornice over a steel beam. Secondly, with a magnetic field that strong it is hard to keep this thing away from any steel or iron. It turns as it goes and seeks its own nesting place. James, you have the climbing line? Good. Fasten one end to that sturdy looking pipe, securely mind you, since it is a long drop. That's it, let me have the other end. You are both now wearing your gloves with the armored palms? Capital. It will do your muscles good to swing across this bottomless chasm. I'll secure the line and twitch it three times when it is ready for you to cross. Here we go." I raised the vital piece of gadgetry.

"Good luck," They said as one.

"Thank you. The sentiment is appreciated, but not the idea. Stainless steel rats in the concrete wainscoting of society must make their own luck."

Cheered by my own philosophy I pulled the trigger. The projectile zinged away and found a nesting place with an audible splat. I pressed the button that drew the monofilament tight —then dived headlong through the open window. Fifteen seconds is not a long time. I bent and extended my legs and started to spin and cursed and hit all at the same moment. All of the impact came on one leg and, if it were not broken, it certainly wasn't feeling too good. This had not happened during the times I had practiced this manuever at home. And the seconds were clicking away quite fast while I hung there numbly and swung about.

The non-functioning leg had to be ignored, hurt as it did. I tapped with my good leg and found the top of the window frame off to the left. I kicked out so I swung in that direction, letting out some line at the same time. This swung me out and brought me back in line with the window—which I hit with my good foot with all my weight behind it.

Nothing happened, of course, since window glass is pretty tough stuff these days. But my foot found the windowsill and struggled for a purchase as my scrabbling fingers sought a grip on the frame—at which precise instant the magnetic field released and I was on my own.

It was a sticky moment. I was holding myself in place by three fingertips and one insecurely planted toe-tip. My other leg dangled limply like an old salami. Below me was a black drop to sure death.

"Doing all right, Dad?" one of the boys whispered from behind me.

I must say it took a certain amount of internal discipline to control the rush of answers that surged to my lips; boys should not hear that sort of language from a parent. With an effort I contained the words and strangled out something that sounded like *fizzlesloop* while I fought for balance. I succeeded, though my fingers were growing tired already. With careful patience I clipped the now-defunct gadget to my waist and wriggled my fingers into the pocket that held the glasscutter.

This was no time for subtlety or sloth. Normally I would have applied the suction cup, cut out a small section of glass, lifted it free, opened the latch, etc. Not now. One quick whip of my arm delineated a rough circle and, in a continuation of the same motion, I made a fist and punched the circle hard. It fell into the room, I hurled the glasscutter after it—and reached in and grabbed the frame.

The glass hit the floor with a loud clang just as my toes slipped off the sill. I hung, dangling from one hand, trying to ignore the sharp edge of glass cutting into my arm. Then, ever so slowly, I bent my arm in a one-armed pull up—one advantage of constant exercise—until I could reach in with my other hand for a more secure grip.

After this it was a piece of cake, though the blood on my arm tended to interfere with arrangements. Getting my foot back on the windowsill, unlocking and opening the window—after disconnecting the burglar alarm—sliding through to drop, quite limply, onto the floor.

"I think I'm getting a little old for this sort of thing," I muttered darkly to myself once my breath had returned. All was silent. The falling of the glass, loud though it had been to me, had apparently gone unheard in the empty building. To work. There was only silence now from the boys—that was professional, but I knew they would be worried. With my pinlight I found a secure anchor for the line, tied it and drew it tight, then twanged it soundly three times.

They were across in seconds.

"You had us worried," one of them understated.

"I had *me* worried! One of you take this light and a medpak and see if you can do something about this cut on my arm. Blood is evidence as you well know."

The slashes were superficial and soon bandaged; my numb leg hurt a good deal but was coming to life. I dragged it around in circles until some function was restored.

"That's it," I finally announced. "Now for the fun part."

I led the way out of the room and down the

dark corridor, walking fast in an attempt to get normal operation back into the leg. The boys fell a bit behind so that I was a good three meters ahead of them when I turned the corner. So they were still concealed when the amplified voice roared out.

"Stay where you are, diGriz. You are under arrest!"

III.

Life is full of little moments like this—or at least *my* life is. I can hardly speak for anyone else. They can be disconcerting, annoying, even deadly if one is not prepared for them. Happily, due to a certain amount of foresight and specialized knowledge, I was prepared for this one. The blackout-gas grenade in my hand was flying forward while the voice was still yammering away. It exploded with a flat boom, the black cloud poured out, and many people complained angrily. To give them something else to complain about, I flipped a gunfight simulator into the smoke. This handy device bangs and booms away like a small war, while at the same time ejecting pellets of laughing gas concentrate in all directions. Sowing a certain amount of confusion, I must add. I turned quietly back to the boys, who were frozen in midstride, eyes as wide and staring as poached eggs. I put finger to lip and waved them back down the corridor, out of earshot of the simulated battle.

"Here is where we part," I said. "And here are the computer programming codes."

Bolivar took them by reflex, then shook his head as though to clear fuzz from his brain. "Dad, would you tell us . . ."

"Of course. When I had to punch the window out I knew that the sound, as small as it was, would be picked up by the security alarms. Therefore I switched to plan B, neglecting to tell you about it in case you might protest. Plan B involves my making a diversion while you two get down to the computer room and finish this job. Using my Special Corps priorities I managed to get all the details you will need to get access to the HER memory files and to wipe them clean. A simple instruction to the brainless computer will destroy the files of all the individuals for light years around who are lucky enough to have their last names begin with the letter **D**. I see myself, at times, as a . . ."

"Dad!"

"I know, I'm sorry, I digress and ramble. After doing that you will also wipe the **U** and **P** files, in case they see some connection between my presence here and the destruction of the records. The selection of these other two letters is not by chance . . ."

"Since *dup* is the most insulting word in Blodgett slang."

"Right you are, James, your brain cells are really ticking over tonight. Your task complete, you will be able to exit from the ground floor by way of one of the windows and mingle with the crowd without being apprehended. Now isn't that a simple plan?"

"Except for the fact you get arrested it's a grand one," Bolivar said. "We can't let you do it, Dad."

"You can't stop me—but the sentiment is ap-

preciated. Be sensible lads. Blood is much easier to identify than fingerprints, and they have plenty of mine to play with back in that room. So if I escape now I am a fugitive on the run as soon as they make the analysis—besides the fact that they have already seen me. In any case, your mother is in prison and I do miss her and look forward to joining her there. With the tax records destroyed all they can hold me on is breaking and entering, and I can post bail and jump it and we will all leave this planet forever."

"They may not allow bail," James worried.

"In that case, your parents will easily crack out of the local crib. Not to worry. Go to your task and I'll off to mine. Return home afterwards and get some sleep, and I'll be in touch. Begone."

And, being sensible boys, they went. I returned to battle, pulling on goggles and inserting nose plugs. I had plenty of grenades—smoke, blackout, lachrymose, regurgitant—the IIER had made me throw up often enough and I wanted to return the favor—which I strewed about with great liberality. Someone began firing a gun, pretty stupid considering that he had a better chance of shooting his own people than of winging me. I waded into the smoke, found him, rendered him unconscious with a sharp blow that would give him a good-sized headache as well, then took the gun away. It had a full clip of bullets which I emptied into the ceiling.

"You'll never catch Slippery Jim!" I shouted into the noisy darkness, then led my pack of pecuniary pirates on a merry chase through the large building. I estimated how long it would take the boys to finish the job, added fifteen minutes as a safety precaution, then gratefully dropped onto a couch in the director's office, lit one of his cigars and relaxed.

"I surrender, I surrender," I shouted out to my stumbling, crying, puking pursuers. "You are too smart for me. Just promise that you won't torture me."

They crept in cautiously, their ranks swollen by the local police who had come to see what all the fun was about, as well as by a squad of combat troops in full battle gear. "All this for little me," I said, blowing a smoke ring in their direction. "I feel flattered. And I want to make a statement to the press about how I was kidnapped, brought here unconscious, then frightened and pursued. I want my lawyer."

Indeed, they lacked any sense of humor; and I was the only one smiling when I was led away. There was not too much rough stuff; too many people around for that, as well as the fact that it really went against the Blodgett personality. The best-selling chewing gum on the planet was called Cud, and they really chewed it. Sirens screamed, cars raced, and I was hauled off in irons.

Though not to prison, that was the funny part. We did reach the prison gate but were stopped at the entrance where there was a lot of shouting and even some fist waving. Then back into the cars and off again to the town hall where, to my surprise, the manacles were removed before I was led into the building. I knew something strange was happening when I was pushed through an unmarked door—with at least one boot toe helping me on my way. The door closed, I brushed my rumpled clothes, then turned and raised my eyebrows at the familiar figure in the chair behind the desk.

"What a pleasant surprise," I said. "Been keeping well. . . ?"

"I ought to have you shot, diGriz," he snarled.

Inskipp, my boss, head of the Special Corps, probably the man with the single greatest amount of power in the Galaxy. The Special Corps was empowered by the League to keep the interstellar peace, which it did in exemplary fashion, if not always in the most honest way. It has been said that you set a thief to catch a thief—and the Corps personified this ideal. At one time, before joining the Corps, Inskipp had been the biggest crook in the Lenticular Galaxy, an inspiration to us all. I am forced to admit that I too had led a less-than-exemplary life before my forced conversion to the powers of goodness—an incomplete conversion, as you may have noticed, though I like to feel that my heart is in the right place. Even if my fingers are not. I took out the blank pistol that I carried for just such occasions and pressed it to the side of my head.

"If you think I should be shot, great Inskipp, then I can but help you. Goodbye, cruel world . . ." I pulled the trigger, and it made a satisfactory bang.

"Stop horsing around, diGriz. This is serious."

"It always is with you, whereas I believe that a certain amount of levity aids the digestion. Let me take that thread from your lapel."

I did, and slipped his cigar case from his pocket at the same time. He was so distracted that he did not notice this until I lit up and offered him one as well. He snatched the case back.

"I need your help," he said.

"Of course. Why else would you be here fixing charges and such? Where is my darling Angelina?"

"Out of jail and on the way home to curb your larcenous offspring. The morons on this planet may not know what has happened to their tax files, but *I* do. However we will forget that for a moment since a ship is waiting at the spaceport to take you to Kakalak-two."

"A drab planet circling a dark star. And what will I find at this unpromising location?"

"It's what you won't find that counts. The satellite base there was the site of the biannual meeting of all planetary chiefs of staff of the League Navy. . . ."

"You said *was* with a certain amount of accentuation. Should I believe. . . ?"

"You should. They have vanished without a trace. So has the satellite. We haven't the slightest idea of what happened to them."

"Will they be missed? I should think that a certain amount of jubilation will be heard below decks—"

"Save the humor, diGriz. If the press gets ahold of this just think of the political repercussions. Not to mention the disorganized state of our defenses."

"That shouldn't worry you too much. I don't see any intergalactic warfare looming on the horizon just now. In any case—let me call home with a censored version of this information and off we go."

Behind the air intake in the wall the creature hung, supported by sucker-equipped tentacles. It blinked large green eyes in the darkness and made muffled chomping sounds as it worked its needle-sharp red teeth against its bony palate. It stank, too.

"There is something fishy here, Slippery Jim, and I don't like it," my Angelina said, eyes flashing fire from the viewplate. How I loved her fire.

"Never, my sweet!" I lied. "A sudden assignment, that's all. A few days' work. I'll be back as soon as it is done. Now that the boys have graduated you must get out the old travel brochures and find a nice spot for us all to go for a holiday."

"I'm glad you mentioned the boys. They slunk in a few minutes ago all bashed and dirty and tired and would not say a word as to what had happened."

"They will. Tell them Dad says All Operations Go and they should tell you the entire story of our evening's interesting adventures. See you soon, my sweet!" I blew her a kiss and switched off before she could protest again. By the time she had heard of the night's nonsense I would be offplanet and finishing this intriguing new assignment. Not that I cared much what happened to a few hundred admirals, but the mechanics of their disappearance should prove interesting.

It did. As soon as we were en route to Kakalak-two I cracked open the file, poured a large glass of Syrian Panther Sweat, a guaranteed coronary in every bottle, and sat down for a good read. I did this slowly, then a second time a little faster—then a third just to hit the high points. When I dropped the folder I saw that Inskipp was seated across from me, glaring, chewing his lip, tapping his fingers on the table and swinging his toe up and down.

"Nervous?" I asked. "Try a glass of this—"

"Shut up! Just tell me what you think, what you've found out."

"I've found out that we are going to the wrong place, for openers. Change course for Special Corps Main Station so I can have a chat with my old friend, Professor Coypu."

"But the investigation—"

"Will accomplish nothing on the spot." I tapped the file. "It's all been done already. All of your military types assembled, usual radio traffic—then the warning shouts and the cryptic cry of 'The teeth!', then nothing more. Your highly trained investigating team went there and found empty space and no remnant of the satellite nor any trace of what had happened. If I go there I would find the same thing. So take me to Coypu."

"Why?"

"Because Coypu is the master of the time-helix. In order to find out what happened I am going to slip back in time just long enough to see what occurred on that fateful day."

"I never thought of that," Inskipp mused.

"Of course not. Because you fly a desk and I am the best field agent in the Corps. I will take one of your cigars as a reward for my sterling qualities, so often displayed."

Prof. Coypu was not interested. He clattered his impressive yellow buck teeth against his lower lip, shook his head *no* so emphatically that the few remaining long strands of gray hair dropped over his eyes, while at the same time making pushing motions with his hands.

"Are you trying to tell us you don't like the idea?" I suggested.

"Madness! No, never. Since the last time we used the time-helix there has been nothing but

temporal feedback along the static synergy curves. . . ."

"Please, Professor Coypu," I begged. "Simplify, if you please. Treat me and your good master, Inskipp here, as if we were scientific imbeciles."

"Which you are. I was forced to use the time-helix once to save us all from dissolution, then was prevailed upon to use it again to rescue you from the past. It shall not be used again—you have my word!"

Inskipp proved he was made of sterner stuff than any rebellious physicist. He stepped forward briskly until he and Coypu were in eyeball-to-eyeball contact—or rather nose-to-nose contact since they both had impressive honkers. Once in position he let fire a salvo of drill sergeant oaths followed by some very realistic threats.

"And as your employer if I say *go*—you *go*. Without a trace. You won't be killed, we are not that cruel, but you will be back teaching first year physics to moronic students on a backwater planet so far from the civilized haunts of man that they think time machine means a watch. Going to cooperate?"

"You can't threaten me," Coypu blustered.

"I already have. You have one minute left. Guards!" Two anthropoid brutes in wrinkled uniforms appeared on each side of the little professor and seized him strenuously by the arms so that his toes dangled just clear of the floor. "Thirty seconds," Inskipp sussurated with all the warmth of a striking cobra.

"I've always wanted to run more calibrating tests on the time-helix," Coypu backwatered quickly.

"Fine," Inskipp relented. "Toes on deck, that's it. This will be an easy one. You will flip our friend here about one week back in time, along with the means to return when his mission is accomplished. We will give you the coordinates and time to which he is to be returned. You need know nothing else. Are you ready, diGriz?"

"As ready as I will ever be." I looked at the space suit and the pile of equipment I had assembled. "Suit up and let's get going. I am as eager to see what happened as you are, and even more eager to return since I have done this time travel gig before and it is hard on the system."

The coiled spring of the time-helix glowed greenly, with all the attraction of a serpent's eye. I sighed and prepared myself for the journey. I almost wished that I had submitted myself to the clammy, corpse-like embrace of the tax man.

Almost.

IV.

The mere fact that this was not my first trip through time did nothing to alter the uncomfortable sensations of the journey. Once again I felt the wrenching in a new and undescribable direction, yet again saw the stars whizzing by like rockets. It was very uncomfortable and lasted far too long. Then the sensations ceased as quickly as they had begun, the grayness of time-space vanished to be replaced by a healthy black universe speckled with stars. I floated in null-G, turning slowly, admiring the spectacle of the satellite station as it swung into view. I took a quick bleep with the radar unit on my chest and saw that I was ten kilometers away, just the spot where I should have been. The satellite was a good-sized one, studded with aerial arrays and blinking beacons, its many windows glowing with lights. Filled, I was sure, with rotund admirals swilling and swigging and occasionally doing a bit of military business. But they had a surprise coming which I was looking forward to. I tuned my radio to their time signal broadcast and found I was an hour later than our target time; Coypu would be interested in hearing that. But I still had almost five hours to kill before the moment of truth. For all the obvious reasons I could not smoke a cigar in the spacesuit—but I could still drink. And I had taken the simple precaution of draining the water from the suit's tank and topping it up instead with a mixture of bourbon and water. Some 32,000 years earlier, on a planet named Earth, I had developed a taste for this beverage. Though that planet had long since been destroyed, I had brought back the formula and, after a certain amount of lethal experimentation, had learned to produce a potable imitation. I wrapped my lips around the helmet drinking tube and poted. Good indeed. I admired the brilliant stars, the nearby satellite, recited poetry to myself; and the hours flew by.

Just five minutes before the important event was due to happen, I was aware of a sudden movement out of the corner of my eye. I turned to see another spacesuited figure floating nearby, seated on a two metre long rocket-shaped object. I whipped out my pistol—I had insisted on bringing it since I had no idea what I would be facing—and pointed it at the newcomer.

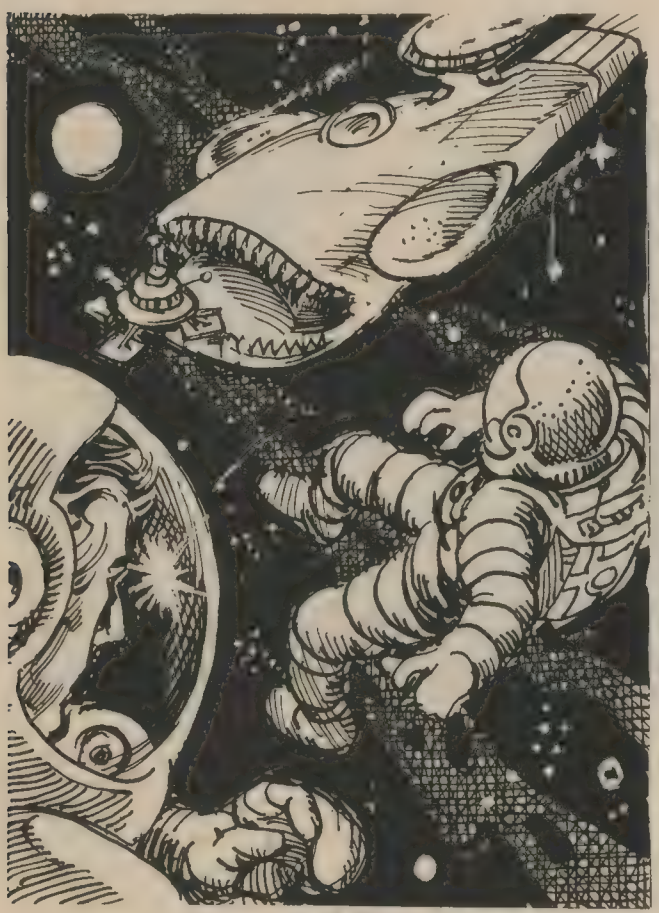
"Keep your hands in sight and turn so I can see you. This gun is loaded with explosive shells."

"Put it away, stupid," the other said, back still turned to me while he worked on the control panel of the rocket. "If you don't know who I am no one does."

"Me!" I said, trying not to gape.

"No, I. Me is you, or some such. Grammar isn't up to this kind of thing. The gun, blockhead!"

I closed my jaw with a clack and slid the pistol back into its holster. "Would you mind explaining . . ."



"I had better since you, or I, didn't have enough brains to think of this in the first place so a second trip had to be made. To bring this spacewarp leech along." He looked at his watch, or I looked at my watch or something like that, then he (I?) pointed. "Keep the eyes peeled—this is really going to be good."

It was. Space beyond the satellite was empty—then an instant later it wasn't. Something large, *very* large, appeared and hurtled towards the satellite. I was aware of a dark, knobbed, elongated form that suddenly split open in the front. The opening was immense, glowing with a hellish light, gaping like a planet-consuming mouth lined with pinnacles of teeth.

"*The teeth!!*" my radio crackled loudly, the single message from the lost—or to-be-lost satellite, then the great mouth was chomping shut and the station vanished from sight in the instant. A streak of fire seared my vision and the white form of the spacewarp leech hurled itself forward at the attacker—none too soon, because there was the sudden shimmer of an operating warp field about the giant shape—then it was gone again.

"What was it?" I gasped.

"How do I know?" I said. "And if I did I wouldn't tell you. Now get back so I can get back or you can, I mean—the hell with it. Move."

"Don't bully," I muttered. "I don't think I should talk to myself this way." I triggered the switch on the case of the return time-helix and, uncomfortably, returned.

"What did you find out?" Inskipp asked as soon as my helmet was opened.

"Mainly that I have to go back a second time. Order up a spacewarp leech and I'll be happy to explain." I decided against going to the trouble of getting out of the suit and putting it on again. So I leaned against the wall and took a long drag on my bourbon pacifier. Inskipp sniffed the air loudly.

"Are you boozing on the job?"

"Of course. It is one of the things that makes the work bearable. Now, kindly shut up and listen. Something really big appeared out of warpspace, just seconds away from the satellite. A neat bit of navigation that I did not think was possible but which obviously is. Whatever it was opened its shining mouth, all lined with teeth, and swallowed the admirals, space station, and all. . . ."

"It's the drink, I knew it!"

"No it's not and I can prove it because my camera was going all the time. Then, as soon as the thing had had lunch, it zipped back into warpdrive and was gone."

"We must get a spacewarp leech onto it."

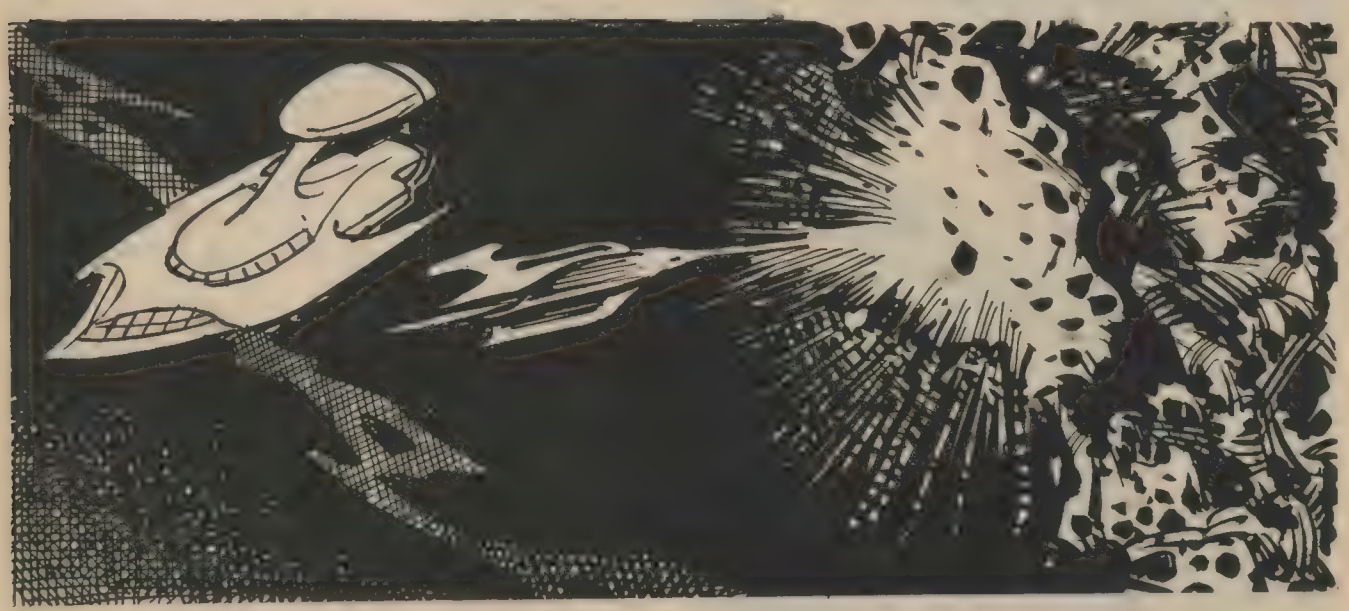
"That's just what I told myself, who came back with said object and launched it in the right direction." Right on cue the leech was rolled in. "Great. Come on, Coypu, get me and this thing back to five minutes before zero hour and I will be able to get out of this suit. By the way, you were an hour out in my first arrival and I expect better timing on this run."

Coypu muttered over the recalibration, set

dials to his satisfaction; I grabbed onto the long white form of the leech, and off I went again. The scenario was the same as the first time, only from a different point of view. By the time I had returned from the second trip I had had enough of time travel and wanted nothing more than a large meal with a small bottle of wine and a soft bed for afters. I got all of these, including more than enough time to enjoy them, for almost a week went by before a report came in about the spacewarp leech. I was with Inskipp when the message arrived and he did a certain amount of eye-boggling and squinting at the sheet as if rereading would change it.

"This is impossible," he finally said.

"That's what I like about you, Inskipp, ever the optimist." I plucked the message from his soggy fingers and read it myself, then checked the coordinates on the chart behind his desk. He was right. Almost.



The spacewarp leech had done its job well. I had fired the thing off in time, and it had homed on the satellite gobbler and attached itself to whatever the thing was. They had zipped off together into warpspace where the leech simply held on until emerging into normal space again. Even if there had been multiple jumps the leech was programmed to stay close until it either detected atmosphere or the mass of a planet or a space station, at which point it had come unglued and drifted away; it was wholly nonmetallic and virtually undetectable. Once it had arrived it used chemical rockets to leave the vicinity of its arrival while it checked for a League beacon. As soon as it found the nearest one it had warped there and announced its arrival. Needless to say, it had taken photographs in all directions when it arrived at its original target area. At that point the computers chortled over the star sights and determined the point in space from which they had been taken. Only this time the answer they came up with was impossible.

"Or very improbable," I said, tapping the chart. "But if the location is correct I have the nasty feeling we are in for some trouble."

"You don't think it was just a coincidence that it was the admirals who got kidnapped?"

"Ha-ha."

"Yes, I thought you would say that."

To understand our problem you have to ponder the physical nature of our galaxy for a moment. Yes, I know it's boring stuff, and best left for the astrophysicists and other dull sods who enjoy this sort of thing. But explanation is necessary. If it helps, think of the Galaxy as being shaped like a starfish. It isn't really, but that's good enough for this kind of simplistic stuff. The legs and center of the starfish are groups of stars, with some other stars in between the legs, along with space gas and random molecules and such. Hope I haven't lost you because I know I'm confusing myself. *Anyway,* all of the League stars are situated in one arm right up at the top there, sticking straight up. A few other surveyed suns are near the hub and a scattered few more in the arms to the left and right. Got that? Okay. Now it seems that our toothy satellitenapper had come from way down in the lower left leg.

Well, why not, you might say, it's all part of the same galaxy. Well, aha, I say right back. But it is a part of the galaxy we have never

been to, have never contacted, have never explored. There are no inhabited planets way down there.

Inhabited by human beings, that is. In all the thousands of years that mankind has been hurtling around the galaxy we have never found another intelligent life form. We have found traces of long vanished civilizations, but millions of years separate us from them. During the days of colonial expansion, the Stellar Empire, the Feudal Follies, and such bits of nonsense, ships went off in all directions. Then came the Breakdown and the bustup of communications for many thousands of years. We are coming out of that now, contacting planets in all states of civilization—or lack of it. But we're not expanding. Maybe we will again, someday, but meanwhile the League is busy picking up the pieces from the first expansion.

Except now there is a new ball game.

"What are you going to do?" Inskipp asked.

"*Me*? I'm going to do nothing except watch you issue orders to investigate this interesting situation."

"Right. This is order one. You, diGriz, get out there and investigate."

"I'm overworked. You have the resources of a thousand planets to draw upon, entire navies, albeit minus the admirals usually in charge, agents galore. Use some of them for a change."

"No. I have the strong feeling that feeding a normal patrol ship into this situation will be like asking them to take a stroll through the guts of an atomic pile."

"A confused description—but I get the message."

"I hope so. You are the crookedest agent I know. You have a sense of survival that, so far, has made you unkillable. I am banking on that and the hideously twisted convolutions of your warped mind to get you through. So get out there and see what the hell is happening, and get back with a report."

"Do I have to bring the admirals back?"

"Only if you want to. We have plenty more where they came from."

"You are heartless and cruel, Inskipp, and as big a crook as I am."

"Of course. How else do you think I run this outfit? When do you leave and what do you need?"

I had to think about that. I couldn't go without telling my Angelina, and once she learned how dangerous it would be she would insist on coming. Fine. I'm a male chauvinist pig at heart, but I know true talent when I see it, and I would rather have her with me than all of the rest of the Special Corps. But what about the boys? The answer to that was obvious as well. With their natural bent and inherited characteristics they were fit only for lives of crime or careers in the Corps. They would have to be blooded sometime, and this looked very much like the time. So it was settled. I unglazed my eyes and realized that I had been muttering to myself for some minutes and that Inskipp was looking at me in a very suspicious manner and reaching slowly for the scramble button on his desk. I groped through my memory for the question he had asked me before I had sunk into my coma.

"Ahh, yes, hmmm, of course. I leave soonest, I have my own crew, but I want a fully automated, grinder class cruiser with all armaments, etc."

"Done. It will take twenty hours to get one here. You have that long to pack and write a new will."

"How charming of you. I will need but one psi call."

I set it up with the communication centre, who were on to the operator on Blodgett like a flash and a line hooked through seconds later to Angelina.

"Hello, my sweet," I said. "Guess where we are going for our holiday?"

V.

"It's a fine ship, Dad," Bolivar said, running his eyes appreciatively over the varied controls of the *L.C. Gnasher.*

"I hope so. These grinder class cruisers are supposed to be the best in space."

"Central fire controls and all, wow," James said, thumbing a button before I could stop him.

"You didn't have to blast than hunk of space rock, it wasn't doing you any harm," I complained, switching the gun controls to my pilot's position before he could cause any more trouble.

"Boys will be boys," Angelina said, looking on with motherly pride.

"Well they can be boys with their own pocket money. Do you know how many thousands of credits it costs every time those energy cannon are fired?"

"No, nor do I care." She raised one delicate eyebrow. "And since when have *you* cared, Slippery Jim, plunderer of the public pocket?"

I muttered something and turned back to the instrument displays. Did I really care? Or

was it just fatherly reflex? No—it was authority! "I'm in charge here," I grated in my best spacedog voice. "I'm captain and the crew can but obey."

"Shall we all walk the plank, dear?" Angelina asked in her most unreasonable tones. I changed the subject.

"Look. If you will all kindly sit over there I will order up a bottle of champagne and a chocolate cake and we will relax a bit before this mission begins and I start cracking the whip."

"You've already told us the whole deal, Dad," James said. "And could you make that a strawberry shortcake?"

"I know you all know all about what has happened and where we are going, but just what we will do when we get there is yet to be determined."

"I'm sure you will tell us in due time, dear. And isn't it a little early in the day for champagne?"

I punched busily at the catering controls and fought to organize my thoughts. All chiefs and no indians in this outfit. I must be firm.

"Now hear this. Order of the day. We blast off in exactly fifteen minutes. We will proceed with all due dispatch to the position in space determined by the spacewarp leech. We will emerge from spacewarp for exactly one point five seconds which will be enough time to make instrument readings of the surrounding volume of space. We will then automatically return to our last position and analyze our findings. We will then act upon them. Understood?"

"You're so masterful," Angelina murmured, then sipped at her champagne. There was no way of telling from her tone of voice just what she had meant by this remark. I ignored it.

"Then forward. Bolivar, I see by your school record that you had good marks in navigation. . . ."

"I had to. We were chained to the desks without food until we passed the test."

"Details, details—that is all behind you now. Set up a course to our target area and let me review it before you actuate. James, you will program the computer to take the readings we will need upon arrival and get us out of there in the second and a half we will have."

"And what shall I do, my love?"

"Open the other bottle, my sweet, and we will look on with pride while our offspring work."

And work they did, with no complaints; and each did a fine job. There were no games now. This was reality and survival, and they threw themselves into it with gusto. I checked and rechecked the results but could find no faults.

"A gold star for both of you. Take a double portion of cake each."

"It rots the teeth, Dad. We would like some champagne instead."

"Of course. In time for a toast. Here's to success."

We clinked glasses and sipped and I leaned across and pressed the flight button. We were off. Like all voyages there was absolutely nothing to do once the computer had been programmed. The twins prowled the ship with tech manuals until they had learned every detail of her operation. Angelina and I found far more interesting things to do and the days tiptoed by on little golden feet—until the alarm pinged and we were ready for the last spacewarp. Once again we assembled in the control room.

"Dad, did you know we have two patrol boats aboard?" Bolivar asked.

"I did, and fine little craft they are. Get ready for the quick look as planned. After we suit up in combat armor."

"Why?" James asked.

"Because you have been ordered to do so," Angelina said and there was a steel edge to her voice. "Plus a moment's rational thought would have given you the answer without asking."

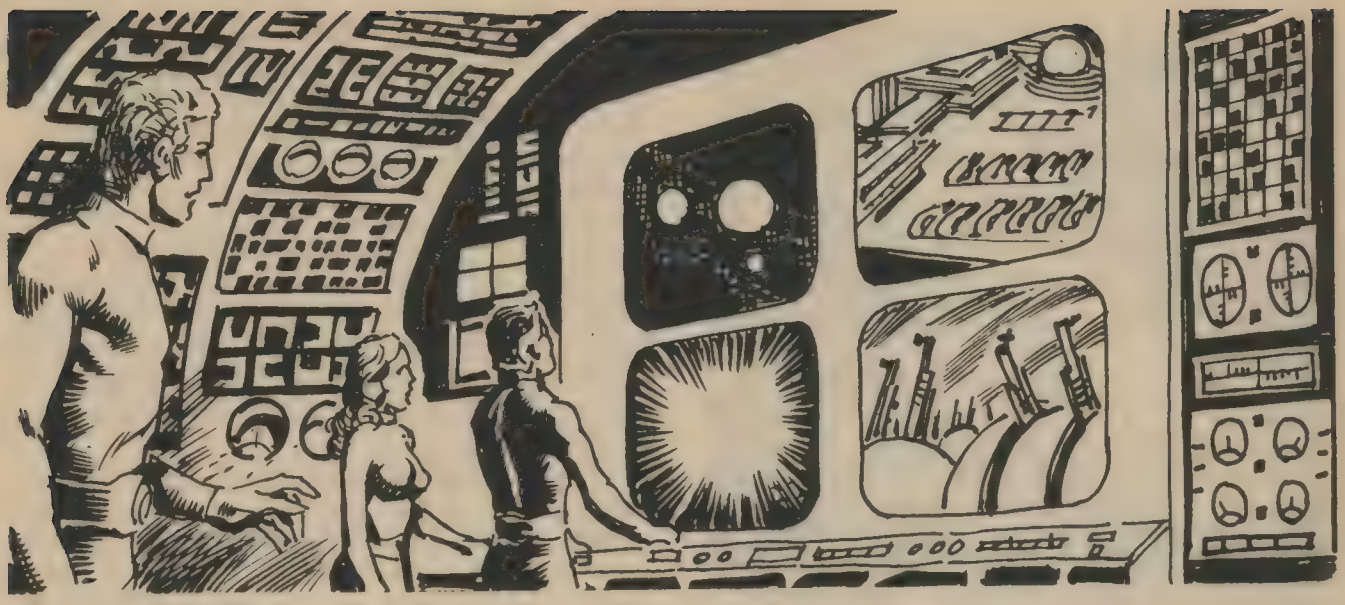
Thus reinforced, I felt my authority was firm and said no more while we all suited up. The combat suits, armored and armed spacesuits, would keep us alive if anything nasty was waiting at the other end.

Nothing was. We arrived, all of the instruments buzzed and clicked—and we were back to our starting point a hundred light years' distant. I made everyone stay armored up in case we had been followed, but we had not been. After a half an hour we climbed out of the suits and ran the results of our investigations.

"Nothing really close," Angelina said, scanning the printout. "But there is a star system just two light years distant."

"Then that's our next target," I said. "The plan is this. We are going to stay right here a nice distance from whatever is out there. But we'll send in a spyeye to chart the system, look for inhabited planets, scout them as well, and send back continuous reports to a satellite receiver in orbit nearby. The satellite will be programmed to return here the instant anything happens to the spyeye. All right?"

"Can I program the spyeye?" Bolivar asked,



speaking an instant ahead of his brother. Volunteers! My heart warmed and I gave them their assignments. Within minutes the machines were launched and, once they were on their way, we sat down to dinner. We were just about finished with the meal when the satellite announced its return.

"That was fast," Angelina said.

"Too fast. If something got the spyeye I think they have some pretty good detection equipment. Let us see what it found out."

I speeded up the recording until we got to the busy part. The star in the center of the screen rushed at us and became a burning sun in an instant. The figures on the second screen revealed that the system had four planets and that radiation consistent with communication and industrial activity was coming from four of them. The spyeye headed for the nearest world and skimmed low.

"My, oh my," Angelina whispered, and I could only nod agreement.

The entire planet appeared to be a single fortress. Mouths of great guns gaped upwards from thick-walled fortresses; row after row of spaceships were lined up in apparently endless ranks. As the spyeye skimmed along, countless war machines rolled up over the horizon. No bit of the planet's natural surface seemed visible, just more and more machines of war.

"There, look," I said. "That looks just like the space whale that swallowed up the admirals and their satellite. And another of the same—and another."

"I wonder if they're friendly?" Angelina said, and was barely able to smile at her own joke. The boys were goggle-eyed and silent.

The end came quickly. Four sudden blips on the radar, closing at headlong speed—and the screen went blank.

"Not *too* friendly," I said, and poured myself a drink with a none-too-steady hand. "Make a recording of what we discovered and get it started on a relay back to base. Route it by the nearest base with a psiman so a condensed report can get back soonest. Then I would like someone to suggest a next step for us. Once we have made the report of what we have discovered we are on our own again."

"And expendable?" Bolivar asked.

"You're catching on, son."

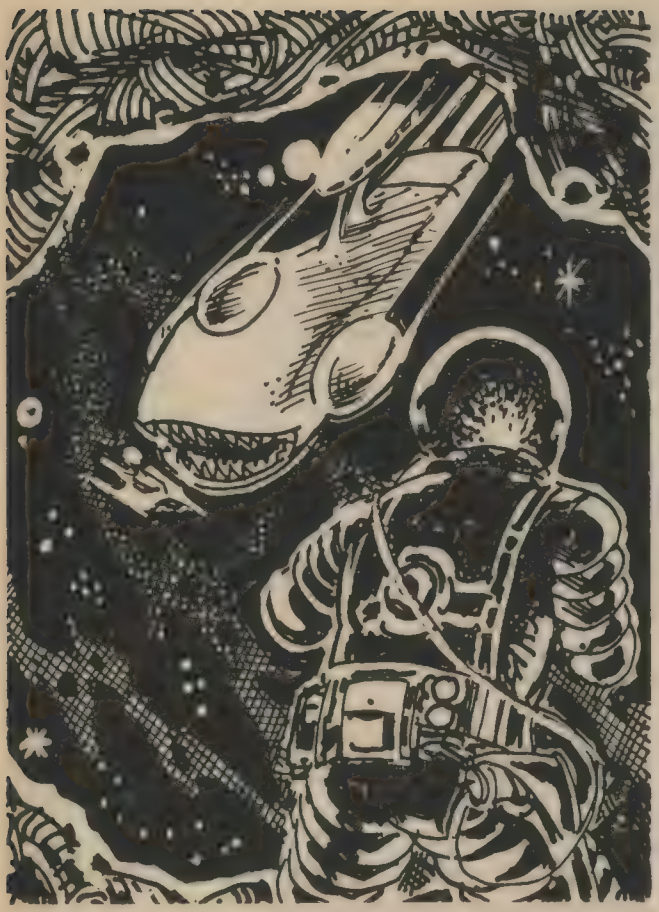
"Great," James said. "On our own with orders from no one."

I don't know how much he meant it, but I was proud of my sons right then and there. "Any suggestions?" I asked. "Because if not I have the glimmerings of a plan."

"You're the captain, dear," Angelina said, and I *think* she meant it.

"Right. I don't know if you noticed it on the readout, but that star system is filled with spatial debris. I suggest we find the right sized hunk of rock and hollow it out and slip one of the patrol boats inside. If we shield it correctly there will be nothing to show that is different from the rest of the boulders floating around that system. Then ease it into orbit, check out the other planets, see if there are any satellites we can slip up on, and generally get more information so we can plot out a plan of attack. There must be someplace we can get closer to that isn't armed to the teeth like that first planet. Agreed?"

After some discussion, since no one could



come up with a better plan, it was. We moved out in space drive, radar blipping, and within an hour had found a cloud of rocks and stone, meteoric iron and interstellar mountains, apparently in elliptic orbit about the nearest star. I eased up slowly to the mass, matching velocities and picking out the one we wanted.

"There," I announced. "Right shape, right size, almost pure iron so it will shield the ship within. Angelina, take the helm and bring us in close. Bolivar, you and I will suit up and slip over there in the patrol boat. We can use its guns to drill the hole we need. James will do communications at this end. Keep in touch with us and send over any special equipment we might need. It should be an easy job."

It was. At minimum output the nose cannon on the patrol boat drilled neatly into the iron, sending out clouds of monatomic gas. When the hole looked deep enough I sealed my suit and went out to examine it for myself, drifting down the length of the silvery drill hole.

"Looks good," I said when I emerged. "Bolivar, do you think you can ease her in, nose first, without breaking off too many pieces of that ship?"

"A piece of cake, Dad!"

He was as good as his word, and I stood to one side as the patrol boat slid silently by and vanished from sight. Now we could plant instrumentation on the surface, connect it through to the ship, cut another hunk of asteroid to plug the hole when we went in, arrange braces for the boat . . .

I was facing the *Gnasher* as I floated there, and she was clearly visible as she stood by, two kilometers away at the edge of the spatial debris field. Her ports glowed cheerfully in the interstellar darkness and I looked forward to getting back and getting my feet up after a good day's work.

Then the black form appeared, blotting out the stars. It was big and fast, very fast; and the mouthlike, glowing opening appeared even as it rushed forward—opening and engulfing the *Gnasher* and closing again, then vanishing, all in an instant while I could only stay mute in paralyzed silence.

Then it was gone. The ship, Angelina, James.

Gone.

VI.

I have had my bad moments but this one, without a doubt, was just about bottom. I was frozen there, fists clenched, staring in horror at the spot where the ship had been but an instant before. Up until this time the sticky moments in my life had, for the most part, involved me and me alone. This solitary danger clears the mind wonderfully and promotes the gushing of the adrenals when instant action is needed for survival. But now I wasn't threatened or in danger, or possibly dead—but Angelina and James were. And there was nothing I could do.

I must have made some sound while thinking this, undoubtedly a nasty one, because Bolivar's voice rang in my ears.

"Dad? What's going on? Is something wrong?"

The tension broke and I dived for the ship, explaining what had happened as I shot into the airlock. He was white-faced but in control of himself when I appeared in the control compartment.

"What do we do?" he asked in a much subdued voice.

"I don't know yet. Go after them of course—but where do we go? We need a plan. . . ."

A high-pitched warble sounded from the

communication equipment and I bulged my eyes in that direction.

"What is it?" Bolivar asked.

"A general psi-alarm. I've read about it in the training manuals but I never heard of it being used before." I punched a course into the controls. "As you undoubtedly know, radio waves travel at the speed of light, so that a message transmitted from a station one hundred light years away would take a hundred years to reach us. Not the speediest form of communication. So most messages are carried in ships from point to point. This is also the only form of communication that is exempt from Einsteinian laws: psi, which appears to be instantaneous. So the psimen can talk to one another, brain to brain, without a time lag. All of the good ones work for the League and most of these for the Special Corps. There are electronic devices that can detect psi communication, but only at full strength and on a simple on-off basis. Every League ship is equipped with a detector like this, though they have never been used except in tests. To make them switch on, *every* psiman alive broadcasts the same thought at the same time: the single word—*trouble*. When this psi-alarm is received, every ship spacewarps to the nearest broadcast station to find out what is wrong. We're on our way."

"Mom and James . . ."

"Finding them will take some thought—and some help. And, call it a nagging hunch, but I have a feeling that this alarm is not unrelated to this present business we are involved in."

Unhappily, I was right. We broke out near a repeater beacon and the recorded signal instantly blasted out of our radio.

". . . return to base. All ships report for orders. Seventeen league planets have been attacked by alien forces in the past hour. Space war has opened on a number of fronts. Report for orders. All ships return to base. All ships . . ."

I had the course set even before the message had begun to repeat itself. To Corps Main Base. There was no place else to go. Resistance to the invaders would be organized by Inskipp, and all of the available information would be there. I will not tell you how we felt as the days rolled by; Bolivar and I found the time bearable only by repeating that if outright destruction were planned, the fire power we had seen could have easily demolished the admirals' satellite and our ship. They wanted the people in them alive. They had to. We did not dare think *why* they wanted them, just that they were prisoners some place and that we would get there and free them.

I flew the ship by reflex as we broke out of spacewarp near the base. Slamming in at maximum G's, reversing at the last possible moment, again at maximum reverse thrust, killing the controls as the magnetic grapples took hold, reaching the port while it was still opening. With Bolivar at my side all of the way. We went through the corridors at the same pace and into Inskipp's office to find him sound asleep and snoring on his desk.

"Speak," I commanded, and he opened a pair of the reddest eyes I have ever seen, then groaned.

"I should have known. The first time I have tried to sleep in four days and you appear. Do you know what . . ."

"I know that one of those space-whales swallowed my cruiser along with Angelina and James, and we have been bucketing back here in a patrol boat for some time."

He was on his feet swaying. "I'm sorry, I didn't know; we've been busy." He staggered to a cabinet and gurgled dark liquid out of a crystal bottle into a glass, which he drained. I sniffed the bottle and gurgled myself the same

amount.

"Explain," I ordered. "What's been going on?"

"Alien invasion—and let me tell you that they are good. Those space-whales are heavily armored battleships and we have never been able to dent one. We have nothing that can touch them in space. So all we can do is retreat. They've made no planetary landings yet that we know of, just bombardment from space, because our land-based units are strong enough to keep them off. We don't know how long this will last."

"Then we are losing the war?"

"One hundred percent."

"How optimistic. You wouldn't care to tell me who we are fighting?"

"Yes. Them, *these!*"

He flicked on the screen and stabbed the buttons, and—in gorgeous color and three dimensional reality—a loathsome form hung before us: tentacled, slimily green, clawed and greasy, with far too many eyes sticking out in odd directions, as well as a number of other appendages best left undescribed.

"Uggh," Bolivar said, speaking for all of us.

"Well if you don't like that," Inskipp growled, "how about this—or this." The slide show of slugs clicked by, creature after creature, each one more loathsome—was it possible?—than the one before. Hideous sqwitchy things, united only in their repugnancy.

"Enough," I finally shouted. "A reducing diet of nausea. I won't eat for a week after this. Which one of them is the enemy?"

"All of them. Let Prof. Coypu explain."

The recording of the professor appeared on the screen and was quite an improvement over the creepy-crawlies despite his gnashing teeth and lecture room manner.

"We have examined the captured specimens, dissecting the dead ones and brain-vacuuming the live ones for information. What we have discovered is rather disconcerting. There are a number of life forms involved from different planetary systems. From what they say, and we have no reason to doubt them, they are involved in a holy crusade. Their single aim is to destroy mankind, wipe all representatives of our species from the galaxy."

"Why?" I asked aloud.

"You will ask why," the recorded Coypu continued. "A natural question. The answer is that they cannot bear looking at us. They consider us too loathsome to exist. There is much talk about not enough limbs; and we are too dry, our eyes don't stick out on stalks, we secrete no nice slime, important guggy organs are missing. They consider us too disgusting to exist side by side with them."

"They should talk!" Bolivar said.

"Beauty is in the eye of the beholder," I advised him. "But I agree with you in any case. Now shut up and listen to the professor."

"This invasion was carefully prepared," Coypu said, shuffling his notes and rattling his fingernails against his protruding teeth. "Since the invasion we have found many alien life forms lurking in dustbins, air conditioner vents, manholes, flush toilets, everywhere. They have obviously been observing us for a long time and massing reports. The kidnapping of the admirals was the first blow of the invasion, an attempt to disrupt our forces by removing their commanders. This left us very short of admirals, but Chief Petty Officers were put in command of units lacking senior officers and the unit efficiency has doubled. However we lack real intelligence of the enemy's structures and bases since only small ships have been captured, manned by junior officers. It is suggested that more information be obtained . . ."

"Oh, thanks very much," Inskipp growled, cutting Coypu off in midsuggestion. "I never would have thought of that myself."

"I can do it," I told him, and enjoyed the way the whites—or really the reds—of his eyes appeared as he rolled them in my direction.

"You? Succeed where all of our forces have failed?"

"Of course. I will abandon modesty and tell you that I am the secret weapon that will win the war."

"How?"

"Let me talk to Coypu first. A few questions, then all shall be revealed."

"We're going after Mom and James?" my son asked.

"You betcha, boy. Top priority on the list, and at the same time we shall save the civilized galaxy from destruction."

"Why do you bother me when I must work?" Coypu screeched from the comscreen, live now rather than recorded and sputtering saliva and as redeyed as Inskipp.

"Relax," I cajoled. "I will solve all your problems for you, as I have done in the past, but I must enlist your aid to do so. How many different species of alien have you discovered so far?"

"Three hundred and twelve. But why . . ."

"I'll tell you in a moment. All sizes, shapes

and colors?"

"You better believe it! You should see my nightmares."

"No thank you. You must have discovered the language they use to communicate with each other. Is it difficult?"

"You already speak it. It's Esperanto."

"Come off it, Coypu!"

"You can't scream at me in that tone of voice!" he said hysterically. Then got control of himself, took a pill, and shuddered. "Why not? They obviously have been watching us for a long time, learning all about us before they invaded. They would have heard a lot of our languages, then settled on Esperanto just as we did as the simplest, easiest, and most efficient form of communication."

"You've sold me. Thank you, professor. Get some rest because I'll be over there and you are going to outfit me to slip into the alien HQ and discover what is going on and to rescue my family, and maybe the admirals if I get a chance."

"Just what the hell are you talking about?" Inskipp snarled, with Coypu's screened image echoing the same words in an equally repellent tone of voice.

"Simple. At least for me. Prof. Coypu is going to manufacture an alien suit, complete with built-in slime-dripper, and I am going to get inside of it. They will welcome me as one of their own. It will be a new kind of loathy who has just heard of their crusade and who is rushing up to enlist. They'll love me. I'm on the way, professor."

The technicians did a fast but excellent job. They stuffed the computer full of disgusting alien details, tentacles, claws, eye-stalks, feelers, everything, then programmed it to draw pictures of variations. Wow! Even Bolivar was impressed. We put a couple of them together and juggled the result around a bit and came up with one that would suit.

"That's my Dad!" Bolivar said, walking around the thing and admiring it from all angles.

It looked roughly like a miniature tyrannasaurus rex with advanced leprosy and molting fur. A biped for the obvious reason that I was one. The heavy tail, that bifurcated into sucker-tipped tentacles at the end, both balanced the weighty device and contained storage space for the powerplant and equipment. An oversize jaw, just aswarm with yellow and green teeth, adorned the front of the head—a little bucktoothed too, like its maker. Ears like a bat, whiskers like a rat, eyes like a cat, gills like a sprat—it really was loathsome. The front split open and I climbed carefully inside.

"The forearms are only lightly powered and fit over your own arms," Coypu said. "But the heavy legs are servopowered and follow the movements of your legs. Watch out for them, those claws can tear a hole in a steel wall."

"I intend to try that. What about the tail?"

"Automatic counterbalance and it wags as you walk. These controls will enable you to thrash it about when you are not walking, make it look realistic. This switch is the automatic twitcher that moves the tail about a bit when you are sitting or standing for a long time. Watch out for this switch—it controls the recoilless .75 mounted in the head just between the eyes. The sight is here on your nose."

"Wonderful. What about grenades?"

"The launcher is under the tail, of course. The grenades themselves are disguised as you-know-what."

"A pretty touch. I see you have the warped kind of mind for this sort of business. Now let me close the zipper and you step back while I try it out."

It took a bit of practice to move the hulking thing about naturally, but after a few minutes I got the knack. I stalked about the lab, leaving a trail of slime wherever I went, gouging ruts in the steel deck with my claws, swishing my tail and knocking things about, and even poked my head into the firing range to let go a few shots with my headgun. Recoilless or not, I decided—as I took pills for my headache—to save this gun for real emergencies. As I went back to the lab a small treaded robot came out of a doorway and ran over my tail.

"Hey, get rid of that thing," I called out as the PAIN IN TAIL signal flashed on my readout board. I aimed a kick at the robot which it easily dodged. Then it stopped in front of me and the turret with the optic lenses popped open and I found myself staring into Bolivar's smiling face.

"Is one permitted to ask just what the hell you are doing in that thing?" one asked.

"Sure, Dad. I'm going with you. Servant-robot to carry your gear. Isn't that logical?"

"No it is not." I marshalled my arguments and knew, even as I began, that this was one argument I was going to lose. I lost it—and was secretly glad. Although I feared for his safety, I could sure use someone to back me up. We would both go.

"Where?" Inskipp asked, looking with disgust at my alien suit when I climbed out.

"To that armed planet where they took the admirals. And, probably, Angelina and James as well. If it's not their headquarters or main base or some such it certainly will do until the real one comes along."

"You wouldn't care to tell me how you plan to get there, would you?"

"Delighted. In the same patrol boat that we arrived in. But before we go I want the hull blown open fatally, then roughly patched. Knock it about inside a good deal, crunch some of the nonessential equipment to make it look good. Get plenty of blood from the slaughterhouse and sprinkle it all over. And, I don't like to suggest this, but realism is what counts—do you have some spare human corpses?"

"Far too many," he answered grimly. "And you want one or two of them, in uniform, aboard?"

"They may save our lives. I am going to go blasting in with that ship, radio blaring and lights flashing, and volunteer myself and my planet of creepies to the noble cause of humanity-destruction."

"Which you just happened to find out about when your people captured this ship?"

"You catch on quick for someone your age. Get it done at once, Inskipp, because I want to leave about five minutes ago."

Since this mission seemed to be the single ray of hope in the unmitigated gloom of the losing war, we had the best of service. The battered patrol boat was loaded aboard a combat cruiser that blasted off the instant we were aboard. They ferried us to our destination, the nearest safe area to the enemy stars, then chucked us out. I navigated us around a massive cloud of dust, skirted a black hole or two to blur our trail, then scuttled into the arm of the Galaxy that held the enemy.

"Ready, son?" I asked, poking my head out through the slit in the alien's neck.

"Ready when you are, Slippery Jim," the robot responded as the turret clacked down and locked into place.

I sealed up and reached out a clawed arm and shook his tentacle. Then got to work. Extra lights had been installed on the hull, of ugly, alien construction, and I switched these on so that we looked like a space-going Christmas tree. I then started the tape of the recently written anthem of my imaginary home planet and began broadcasting it at full volume on 137 wavelengths. Thus prepared, we headed leisurely for the armored planet, wafted there on the strains of delightful groaning music.

Sliming and gurgling,
gnashing with crunch.
We're the most sordid,
of the alien bunch.

VII.

"Kiu vi estas?" the gravelly voice said, the screen lighting up at the same instant to display a particularly repulsive alien physiognomy.

"Kiu mi estas? Ciuj konas min, se mi ne konas vin, belulo . . ."

I had decided to be arrogant, secure in a warm welcome, and very flattering—though calling this worm-faced echh 'handsome' took some doing. But the flattery appeared to help; it preened a handful of tendrils with a damp tentacle and continued in a more friendly tone of voice.

"Come, come, cutey. They may know who you are at home—but you're a long way from home now. And there is a war on so we have to obey security regulations."

"Of course, naturally, I am just filled with enthusiasm. Are you *really* fighting a war of extermination against the dry-stick-pink-black aliens?"

"We're doing our best, gorgeous."

"Well, count us in! We caught this ship sneaking up on our planet—we have no spacers but fire a mean combat rocket—and shot it down. We brain-sucked the survivors, learned their language, and discovered that all the attractive races in the galaxy had united against them. We want to join your forces; I am ambassador—so issue instructions for we are yours!"

"Mighty nice sentiments," the thing slobbered. "We'll send a ship up to guide you in and the welcoming committee will make you welcome. But there is one question, sweety."

"Ask away, handsome."

"With eyes like yours—you are female, aren't you?"

"Next year, at this same time I will be. Right now I'm in neuter state halfway from he to she."

"It's a date then. See you in a year."

"I'll write it in my diary now," I cooed and hung up and reached for the nearby bottle. But Bolivar the Robot was ahead of me and had poured a large glass which I sucked at through a straw.

"Am I wrong, Dad," he asked, "or did that refugee from the sewage works have the hots for you?"

"Unhappily, my boy, you are right. In our ignorance my little disguise turns out to be the height of female pulchitrude among the awful-awfuls. We must make it more loathsome!"

"That will probably make it more sexy."

"You're right, of course." I insufflated feelingly through the straw. "I'll just have to put up with their amorous attentions and try to turn it to some benefit."

Our guide ship appeared moments later and I locked the automatic pilot onto its tail. We floated downward, through unseen minefields and defensive screens, to land on a metal pad inside a large fortress. I hoped this was the VIP field, not the prison entrance.

"You'll want your helmet, won't you, Dad," Bolivar said in a robotic tone of voice, drawing me back from the brink of my sea of black thoughts.

"Right you are, O good and noble robot." I put on the goldplated steel helmet with the diamond nebula on front, and examined my image in the mirror. Delicious. "And best not to call me Dad any more. It gives rise to some impossible biological questions."

An improbable parade of slithering, hopping, and crawling figures slogged up when we appeared through the lock with the Bolivar-robot carrying the carefully constructed alien luggage. One individual in slimy gold braid stepped out of the pack and waved a lot of claws in my direction.

"Welcome, stellar ambassador," it said. "I am Gar-Baj, First Official of War Council."

"A pleasure I'm sure. I am Sleepery Jeem of Geshtunken."

"Is Sleepery your first name or a title?"

"It means, in the language of my race, He Who Walks on Backs of Peasants With Sharp Claws, and denotes a member of the nobility."

"A remarkably compact language, Sleepery, you must tell me more about it again—in private." Six of his eighteen eyes winked slowly and I knew the old sex-appeal was still at work.

"I'll take you up on that my next fertile

period, Gar. But for now—it is war! Tell me how things go and what we of Geshtunken can do to aid this holy cause."

"It shall be done. Let me guide you to your personal quarters and explain as we go."

He dismissed the onlookers with the wave of one tentacle, signalling me to follow him with another. I did, with my faithful robot rolling after me.

"The war goes as planned," he said. "You would of course not know, but we have been many years in the planning stage. Our spies have penetrated all of the human worlds and we know their strength down to the last raygun charge. We cannot be stopped. We have absolute control of space and are now preparing for the second phase."

"Which is . . . ?"

"Planetary invasion. After knocking off their fleet we'll pick off their planets, one by one, like ripe *cerizoj.*"

"That's for us!" I shouted, and raked great gouges in the metal flooring with my claws. "We Gesthtunken are fighting fools, ready to lead the charge, willing to die in a cause that is just."

"Just what I was hoping to hear from someone as well built as you, claws, teeth and such. In here, if you please. We have plenty of transport ships but can always use experienced troops—"

"We are death-defying warriors!"

"Even better. You will attend the next meeting of the War Council and plans will be drawn up for mutual cooperation. But now you must be tired and want to rest."

"Never!" I chomped my jaws and bit a chunk out of a nearby couch. "I want no rest until the last dry enemy has been destroyed."

"A noble sentiment but we must all rest sometime."

"Not the Geshtunken. Don't you have a captive or two I could disembowel for a propaganda film?"

"We have a whole load of admirals, but we need them for brainsuck to aid in the invasion."

"Too bad. I pluck legs and arms from admirals like petals from flowers. Don't you have any female prisoners—or children? They scream nice."

This was the 64,000 credit question hidden among all the other rubbish and my tail twitched as I waited for the answer. The robot stopped buzzing.

"It's funny you should ask. We did capture an enemy spy ship that was crewed by a female and a male youth."

"Just the thing!" I shouted, and my excitement was real. "They must need torture, questioning, crunching. That's for me. Lead me to them!"

"Normally I would be happy to. But that is now impossible."

"Dead . . . ?" I said, fighting to turn the despair in my voice into disappointment.

"No. But I wish they were. We still haven't figured out what happened. Five of our best fighting-things alone in a room with these two pallid and undersized creatures. All five destroyed; we still don't know how. The enemy escaped."

"Too bad," I said, simulating boredom now with the whole matter, swinging my tail around and scratching its scrofulous tip with a claw. "You have of course recaptured them?"

"No. And that's the strange part. It has been some days now. But, you do not wish to be bothered by petty worries. Refresh yourself and a messenger will be sent for you when the meeting is joined. Death to the crunchies!"

"Death to the crunchies yourself. See you at the meeting."

The door closed behind him and the Bolivar-robot spoke.

"Where will you have the bags, mighty Sleepery?"

"Anywhere, metallic moron." I lashed out with a kick that the robot scuttled back to avoid. "Do not bother me with such petty matters."

I walked about the room, singing the Geshtunken national anthem in a shrill voice, managing to cover all parts of the room as I did so. In the end I plopped down and opened the zipper in my neck.

"You can come out and stretch if you want to," I said. "These drips are really most trusting because I can detect no bugs, spies, or optic pickups anywhere in these quarters."

Bolivar exited the robot quickly and did some deep knee bends to the accompaniment of cracking joints. "It gets tight in there after awhile. What next? How do we find Mom and James?"

"A good question that brings no easy answer to mind. But at least we know that they are alive and well and causing the enemy trouble."

"Maybe they left messages for us—or a trail we could follow."

"We will look, but I don't think so. Anything we might follow these uglies could as well. Crack out a bottle of Old Thought Provoker from your kit there and see if there is a glass

in this dump. And I will think."

I thought hard, but with little results. Perhaps the atmosphere was a bit offputting. The wall hangings were of moldy green over flaking red paint. Half of the room was filled with a swimmingpool-sized mud wallow that brimmed over with steaming gray sludge that burbled and plopped up big bubbles from time to time that stank atrociously. Bolivar went exploring, but after almost being sucked under by the sanitary arrangements and having a quick look at the food supply—he turned as green as my alien hide—he was happy enough to sit and switch channels on the TV. Most of the programs revealed were impossible to understand, though loathsome to a great degree, or if understandable were depressing—like the current battle reports.

Neither of us realized that the TV was also the communicator until a bell pinged and the scene of space bombardment of a helpless planet gave way to the always repellent features of Gar-Baj. Luckily the diGriz reflexes were still operating. Bolivar dived aside out of the range of the pickup while I kept my back turned and zipped up my neck.

"I do not wish to disturb you, Jeem, but the War Council meets and wishes your presence. The messenger will show you the way. Death to the crunchies."

"Yeah, yeah," I muffled as his image faded, trying to get my head into the right position among the folds of plastic flesh. A grating sound issued from an annunciator by the door.

"Get that, robot," I said. "Say I'll be there in a moment. Then break out my train."

When we issued forth, the monster who had been sent to fetch me goggled his eyes at the scene, impressively so since he had a couple of dozen eyes that suddenly protruded a good meter on stalks.

"Lead the way, spaghetti head," I ordered.

He went and I followed—followed in turn by my robot who held the free end of the train that was buttoned about my shoulders. This attractive garment was a good three meters of shining purple fabric, picked out with gold and silver stars and edged with heavy, shocking-pink lace. Yummy! Luckily I didn't have to look at the thing, but I pitied poor Bolivar who did. I was sure the locals would love it. Not that I needed a train, but it seemed the simplest way to keep Bolivar by me at all times.

The council was impressed, if globbles, slurps, and grunts are meant to be flattery; and I went twice around the council chamber before taking the indicated seat.

"Welcome lovely Sleepery Jeem to our War Council," Gar-Baj slobbered. "Rarely has this chamber been graced by such a gorgeous presence. If all the Geshtunken are like you—and good fighters too, I am sure—this war will be won on morale alone."

"A propaganda film," something black, damp, and repulsive gurgled from the far side of the room. "Let us share our pleasure with the troops in the field and reveal this lovely presence to all. Also let's mention all the extra combat troops we will soon have."

"Great idea! Wonderful!"

There were shouts of acclaim and joy from all sides accompanied by a feverish waving of tentacles, suckers, eye-stalks, antennae, claws, and other things too repulsive to mention. I

almost lost my lunch, but smiled and clattered my teeth together to show how pleased I was. I don't know how long this sort of nonsense would have gone on if the secretary-thing had not hammered loudly on a large bell with a metal hammer.

"We have urgent business, gentlethings. Can we get on with it?"

There were angry shouts of 'spoilsport'—and worse—and the secretary cringed. It was a repulsive creature, like a squashed frog with a furry tail and a sort of leechlike sucker where the head should be. It flapped its forearms apologetically, but nevertheless went right back to work when the shouting had died down.

"This four-thousand and thirteenth meeting of the War Council will come to order. Minutes of the last meeting are available if any of you care. New business is battle order, logistic invasion plans, bombardment reserve management, and inter-species food supply availability." The secretary waited until the groans had died away before it continued. "However before we begin we are asking our new member for a brief speech to the broadcast with the evening news. We are recording, Sleepery Jeem; will you oblige us with your address . . ."

There was a lot of splattering slopping sounds from many tentacles, which I realized passed for applause, and I bowed into the camera's eye, hitching my train up a bit as I did.

"Dear wet, slimy, soggy friends of the galactic cluster," I began, then waited with eyes lowered coyly until the applause died away. "I cannot tell what pleasure beats in my four hearts to squat here among you today. From the moment we on Geshtunken discovered that there were others like us we oozed with eagerness to join forces. Chance made this possible and I am here today to say that we are yours, united in this great crusade to wipe the pallid pipestems from the face of our Galaxy. We are known for our fighting abilities . . ." I kicked a hole through the lectern with the words and everything cheered, ". . . and wish to bring our skills to this holy cause. In the words of our Queen, the Royal Engela Rdenrundt, you can't hold a good Geshtunken down—nor would you want to try!"

I sat down to more excited shouts and crossed my claws, hoping my little ruse had succeeded. No one seemed to have noticed. It was a long shot that might just work. Wherever Angelina was on this planet there was a chance that she might be able to get near a communicator. If so she might watch the news and *if* she did she would certainly recognize the name under which I had first met her, some years ago. A long shot, but better than nothing.

My fellow monsters were not really happy with work, but the sordid little secretary managed to drive them to it eventually. I memorized all the essentials of the various war plans and, being a newcomer, offered no suggestions. Though when I was asked how many combat troops we Geshtunken could field I gave inflated figures that got them all happy again. It went on like this for far too long, and I wasn't the only one who cheered when the secretary announced that the meeting was adjourned. Gar-Baj writhed up and laid what I can only assume was a friendly tentacle across my tail.

"Why not come to my place first, cutey? We can crack a crock of rotted slung juice and have a nibble or two of pyekk. A good idea?"

"Wonderful, Gar-baby, but Sleepery is sleepy and must get the old beauty rest. After that we *must* get together. Don't call me—I'll call you."

I swept out before he could answer, the robot rushing after with the end of my train. Down the rusty corridors to the door to my own place, hurrying through it happily to escape the passionate embraces of my loathy Lothario.

But the door slammed shut before I could touch it and a blaster shot burned the floor next to me. I froze as a gravelly voice ground in my ear.

"Move and next one is right through your rotten head.'

VIII.

"I'm unarmed!" I shouted in a voice just as hoarse as that of my unseen attacker. "I'm reaching for the sky—don't shoot!" Was that voice somehow familiar? Dare I risk a look? I was trying to make my mind up when Bolivar made it up for me. He popped open the robot and stuck his head out.

"Hi, James," he called cheerily. "What's wrong with your throat? And don't shoot that ugly alien because your very own Dad is inside."

I risked a look now to see James lurking behind a piece of furniture, jaw and blaster hanging limply with astonishment. Angelina, tastefully garbed in a fur bikini, stepped in from the other room, holstering her own gun.

"Crawl out of that thing at once," she or-

dered; and I struggled free of its plastic embrace and into her decidedly superior one. "Yum," she yummed after a long and passionate kiss was terminated only by lack of oxygen. "It has been light years since I've seen you."

"Likewise. I see you got my message."

"When that creature mentioned *that* name on the news broadcast I knew you were involved somehow. I had no way of knowing you were inside, which was why we came with the guns."

"Well, you are here now and that is what counts, and I love your outfit," I looked at James's fur shorts, "and James's as well. I see you go to the same tailor."

"They took all our clothes away," James said, in the same rough voice. I looked at him more closely.

"Does that scar on your throat have anything to do with the way you talk?" I asked.

"You bet. I got it when we escaped. But the alien that gave it to me, that's where we got the fur we're wearing."

"That's my boy. Bolivar, crack a bottle of champagne out of our survival kit, if you please. We shall celebrate this reunion while your mother explains just what has happened since we saw her last."

"Quite simple," she said, wrinkling her nose delightfully at the bubbles. "We were engulfed by one of their battleships, I'm sure you saw that happen."

"One of the worst moments of my life!" I moaned.

"Poor darling. As you can imagine we felt about the same way. We fired all the guns, but the chamber is lined with collapsium and it did no good. Then we held our fire to get the aliens when they came to get us, but that was no good either. The ceiling of the chamber came down and crushed the ship and we had to get out. That was when they disarmed us. They thought. I remembered that little business you did on Burada with the poisoned fingernails, and we did the same here. Even our toenails, so when they took our boots away it helped us. So we fought until our guns were empty, were grabbed, taken to a prison or a torture chamber—we didn't stay long enough to find out—then we polished off our captors and got away."

"Wonderful! But that was endless days ago. How have you managed since?"

"Very well, thank you, with the aid of Cill Airne here."

She waved her hand as she said this, and five men jumped in from the other room and waved their weapons at me. It was disconcerting; yet I stood firm, seeing that Angelina was unmoved by the display. These men had pallid skins and long black hair. Their clothing, if it could be called that, was made of bits and pieces of alien skin held together by scraps of wire. Their axes and swords looked crude—but serviceable and sharp.

"Estas granda plezuro renkonti vin," I said, but they were unmoved. "If they don't speak Esperanto what do they talk?" I asked Angelina.

"Their own language of which I have learned a few words. *Do gheobhair gan dearmad taisce gach seoid,"* she added. They nodded in agreement at this, clattered their weapons, and emitted shrill war cries.

"You made quite a hit with them," I said.

"I told them that you were my husband, the leader of our tribe, and you had come here to destroy the enemy and lead them to victory."

"True, true," I said, clasping my hands and shaking them over my head while they cheered again. "Bolivar, break out the cheap booze for our allies while your Mom tells me just what the hell is going on here."

Angelina sipped at her champagne and frowned delicately. "I'm not sure of all the details," she said. "The language barrier and all

that. But the Cill Airne appear to be the original inhabitants of this planet, or rather settlers. They're human enough, undoubtedly a colony cut off during the Breakdown. How or why they came this far from the other settled worlds we may never know. Anyway, they had a good thing going here until the aliens arrived. It was hatred at first sight. The aliens invaded and they fought back, and are apparently still fighting back. The aliens did everything they could to wipe them out, destroying the surface of this planet and covering it, bit by bit, with metal. It didn't work. The humans penetrated the alien buildings and have lived ever since hidden in the walls and foundations."

"Stainless steel rats!" I cried. "My sympathy goes out to them."

"I thought it might. So after James and I escaped and were running down a corridor, not really sure where we were going; this little door opened in the floor and they popped out and waved us inside. That's when the last alien

guard jumped us and James dispatched him. The Cill Airne appreciated this and skinned him for us. Perhaps we couldn't talk their language, but mayhem speaks louder than words. And that's really about all that happened to us. We have been lurking around in wainscotings and putting together a plan to capture one of their spacers. And to free the admirals."

"You know where they are?"

"Of course. And not too far away from here."

"Then we need a plan. And I need a good night's rest. Why don't we sleep on it and do battle in the morn?"

"Because there is no time like the present and besides, I know what you have on your mind. Into battle!"

I sighed. "Agreed. What do we do next?"

That was decided when the door burst open and my paramour Gar-Baj came charging in. He must have had love on his mind, if the pink nighty he was wearing meant anything, so he was a little off his guard.

"Jeem, my sweet—why do you stand there unmoving with your neck open? Awwrrk!"

He added this last when the first sword got him in the hams. There was a brief battle, which he lost quite quickly, though not quickly enough. He was not completely in the room when the fight started and when his tail was cut off the last bit, equipped undoubtedly with a rudimentary brain of its own, went slithering back down the corridor and out of sight.

"We had better make tracks," I said.

"To the escape tunnel," Angelina cried.

"Is it big enough for my alien disguise?" I asked.

"No."

"Then hold all activity for a few moments while I think," I said, then thought. Quickly. "I have it. Angelina—do you know your way around this monsters' maze?"

"I do indeed."

"Wonderful. Bolivar, it's your chance to walk. Out of the robot and let your mother get in. Brief her on the controls and then go with the others. We'll meet you at whatever place it is you have been staying."

"How considerate," Angelina beamed. "My feet were getting tired. James, show your brother the way and we'll join you later. Better take along some chops from this creature you have just butchered since we have a few more coming to dinner."

"Meaning?" I asked.

"The admirals. We can free them with all this weaponry you have imported, and I will lead them to safety in the subterranean ways."

There was instant agreement on the plan. In the diGriz family we are used to making up our minds rather quickly, while the Cill Airne

had learned to do the same in their constant war against the enemy. Some moldering floor coverings were thrown back to reveal a trapdoor that was levered up. I was beginning to think that the aliens were not very bright if they let this sort of thing happen under their very noses, or smelling tentacles or whatever. Bolivar and James dropped into the opening followed by our allies who exited with many shouts of *Scadan, Scadan!*

"It's really quite cozy in here," Angelina said, slipping into place in the robot. "Is there a closed circuit radio for communication?"

"There is. Circuit 13 there, a switch near your right hand."

"I've found it," she said, then her voice spoke into my ear. *"You had better lead the way and I'll give you instructions as we go."*

"Your slightest wish sends me forth."

I stomped out into the corridor with the robot scuttling after. The severed section of tail had vanished. I kicked and buckled the metal door until it was jammed into its frame, to confuse the pursuit as much as possible, then led the way down the metal corridor.

It was a long, and frankly boring, trip through the metallic city. The aliens did not appear to be good planners, and the constructions themselves seemed to have just been added on with little reference to what had come before. One minute we would be walking down a rusty, riveted corridor with a sagging ceiling—and the next would be crossing a mesh-metal field under the open sky. Sometimes the walkways were used as watercourses as well and I would thrash along at great speed propelled by my wildly waving tail. The robot was too heavy for this and could only roll along the bottom. We passed through warehouses, factories—have you ever seen a thousand things like decaying alligators all working drill presses at once?—dormitories, and other locales that defy description. And everywhere were the loathies, chattering away in Esperanto and giving me a big wave as I passed. Very nice. I waved back and muttered curses inside the head.

"I'm getting a little tired of this," I confided to Angelina on our closed circuit.

"Courage, my brave, we are almost there. Just a few kilometers more."

A barred gate did eventually appear ahead, guarded by spear-bearing, tooth-rattling creatures who began a great noise when I appeared. They banged their spears on the floor and shouted and chomped so strongly that bits of splintered teeth flew in all directions.

"Jeem, Jeem!" they cried. And, "Geshtunken forever! Welcome to our noble cause!" They were obviously all fans of the evening news broadcast and had caught my shtick. I raised my claws and waited until the tumult died.

"Thank you, thank you," I cried. "It is my great pleasure to serve beside nauseating creatures like yourselves, spawn of some loathsome world far out among the decaying stars." They were prone to flattery and cried aloud for more. "During my brief time here I have seen things that creep, crawl, wriggle and flop, but I must say that you lot are the creepiest, crawlingest, wriggliest, and biggest flop I have met yet." Time out for hoarse shouts of repulsive joy, then I got down to business. "We on Geshtunken have seen only one shipload of pallid-crunchies which we instantly butchered by reflex. I understand you have a whole satellite load of them here. Is that true?"

"It is indeed, Jeem the Sleepery," one of them spattered. I saw now that it had gold comets screwed into the sides of its head, undoubtedly denoting high rank of some kind. I addressed my questions in its direction.

"That is good news indeed. Are they in here?"

"Indeed they are."

"You don't have an old damaged one you don't need any more for me to disembowel or eat or something?"

"Would that I could to please one as cute as yourself, but, alas, no. All of them are needed for information purposes. And after that the roster is already full, highest rank first, with volunteer disembowelers."

"Well, too bad. Is there any chance I can get a peep at them? Know your enemy and all that."

"Just from here. No one is allowed closer without a pass. Just slip an eyeball or two through the bars and you'll see them over there."

One of my fake eyeballs on stalks did have a TV pickup in it, and I slithered it through and turned up the magnification. Sure enough, there they were. And a scruffy lot, too. They shuffled in little circles or lay on the deck, gray-bearded and gaunt, the rags of their uniforms hanging from them. They may have been admirals, but I was still sorry for them. Even admirals were human once. They would be freed!

"Thanks indeed," I said, snaking back my eyeball. "Most kind and I'll remember you in my report to the War Council."

I waved as we retreated, and they all waved

back; with all those flying tentacles it looked like an explosion in the octopus works.

"I am depressed," I confided in my robot-wife as we rounded the next bend. "No way to get into them that way."

"Be of good cheer," she radioed. *"And let's try the next stairwell. If there is a level below this one then we can penetrate from beneath."*

"My genius," I said, and clattered my claws lovingly on her metallic shoulder. "That is just what we shall do. And I believe that dead ahead is just what we are looking for. But how will we know when we are under the right spot?"

"We will know because I planted a sonic transponder while you were making your political speech to those slugs.

"Of course! You had this in mind all the time. If it were anyone else I would be green with jealousy. But I writhe with pleasure at the ingenuity of my little wife."

"Well if you do, try not to phrase the praise in such male chauvinist pig terms. Women are as good as men; usually better."

"I stand chastised, robot mine. Lead the way and I shall follow."

We clattered and bumped down a slime-covered stairway into total darkness. Unused—even better. Angelina switched on some spotlights and we saw a massive metal door ahead that sealed off the foot of the stairs.

"Shall I burn it down?" she asked, poking her head out of the robot for a bit of air.

"No. I'm suspicious. Try out your detectors and see if there is any electronic life beneath the surface."

"Plenty," she said, sweeping it carefully. "A dozen alarm circuits at least. Shall I neutralize them?"

"Not worth the effort. Scan that wall there. If it's clear we'll go in around the door."

We did. These aliens really were simple-minded. The burned-open wall led to a storeroom and the wall beyond this opened into the chamber the bugged door was supposed to guard. Easy enough to do for even an amateur cracksman and my opinion of the enemy IQ dropped a few more points.

"So *this* is why they didn't want anyone cracking in here!" Angelina said, flashing her spotlight around.

"The town treasury," I yummed. "We must come back and dip into it when we get a chance."

Mountains of money stretched away in all directions, loot of a hundred worlds. Gold and platinum bars, cut diamonds, coins and notes of a hundred different kinds; money enough to build a bank out of, much less open one. My larcenous instincts were overwelmed, and I kicked open great bags of bullion with my claws and wallowed in the wampum.

"I know that relaxed you," Angelina said indulgently. "But should we not get on with our rescue operation?"

"Of course. Lead on. I am indeed refreshed."

She beeped her subsonic beeper and followed the pointing arrow. It led us through the treasure hoard, and—after burning down a few more doors and walls—we reached the indicated spot.

"We're right under a transponder," Angelina said.

"Good." I took a careful sight. "Then the barred gate will be here, and the prisoners just about here." I paced off the distance carefully. "There were some chairs and debris right here, so if we approach from this spot we should be concealed when we come up. Is your drill ready?"

"Whirring and humming."

"Then that's the spot. Go."

The drill arm extended and began grinding into the rusty ceiling. When the drill note changed Angelina switched off all the lights and drilled even slower in the darkness. This time when she dropped the drill a ray of light shone down through the hole. We waited silently—but there was no alarm.

"Let me get one of my eyes through the hole," I said.

By balancing on tiptail and tiptoe I got my body up high enough to extend an eye stalk up through the opening. I gave it a 360° degree scan then withdrew it.

"Really great. Junk all around, none of the admirals looking in our direction, and the guards are out of sight. Give me the molecular unbinder and stand back."

I climbed out of the alien outfit and up onto its shoulders where I could easily reach the ceiling. The molecular unbinder is a neat little tool that reduces the binding energy between molecules so that they turn to monatomic powder and slough away. I ran it in a big circle, trying not to sneeze as the fine dust rained down, then grabbed the metal disc as I closed the circle. After handing this down to Angelina I put a wary head up through the opening and looked around. All was well. An admiral with an iron jaw and a glass eye was sitting nearby, the picture of dejection. I decided on a little morale raising.

"Psst, admiral," I hissed, and he turned my way. His good eye widened and his jutting jaw sank in an impressive manner as he spotted my disembodied head. "Don't say a word out loud—but I am here to rescue you all. Understand? Just nod your head."

So much for trusting admirals. Not only didn't he nod his head, but he jumped to his feet and shouted at the top of his voice.

"Guards! Help! We're being rescued!"

from below.

"Nothing good," I hissed. "Absolute silence now."

With a stealthy motion I lowered my head until just my eyes were above the rim of the opening, still concealed by the broken chairs, empty ration boxes and other debris. Had the guards heard the disturbance? Certainly the other prisoners had. Two octogenarian officers tottered up and looked at the sprawled form of their comrade.

IX.

I didn't really expect much gratitude, particularly from an officer, but this was ridiculous. To traverse thousands of light years of space, through dangers too numerous to mention, to suffer the loving embraces of Gar-Baj; all of this to rescue some moth-eaten admirals, one of whom instantly tried to turn me in to the guards. It was just too much.

Not that I hoped for anything much better. You don't live to be a gray-whiskered stainless steel rat without being suspicious at all times. My needle gun was ready, since I was alert for trouble from the guards, but I was also certainly prepared to get some from the prisoners as well. I flicked the control switch from *poison* to *sleep*—which took an effort of will, let me tell you—and pinged a steel needle into the side of the admiral's neck. He slumped nicely, dropping towards me with arms outstretched as though for one last grab at his saviour.

I froze, motionless, when I saw what was revealed on those skinny wrists.

"What's happening?" Angelina whispered

"What's wrong? Fit of some kind?" one of them asked. "Did you hear what he shouted?"

"Not really. I had my hearing aid turned off to save the battery. Something about Mards Phelp, Meer Seen Plescu."

"Doesn't make sense. Perhaps it means something in his native language?"

"Nope. Old Schimsah is from Deshnik and that doesn't mean a thing in Deshnikian."

"Roll him over and see if he's still breathing."

They did and I was watching closely and nodded approvingly when my needle dropped from Old Schimsah's neck when they moved him. With this evidence removed it would be a couple of hours at least before he came to and told them what had happened. That was all the time I needed. Plans were already forming in my head.

Dropping back down I grabbed the disc of metal so recently removed, smeared the edge with lepak-glue—stronger than welding—and pushed it back up into place. There was a crunching sound as the glue set and the ceiling, not to mention the floor above, was solid

again. Then I clambered back down and sighed heavily.

"Angelina, would you be so kind as to turn on some of your lights and to crack out a bottle of my best whiskey."

There was light, and a sloshing glass, and patient Angelina waited until it had been lowered from my lips before she spoke.

"Isn't it time you confided in your wife just what the hell is going on?"

"Pardon me, light of my life, I just had a bad moment there." I drained the glass and forced a smile. "It started when I whispered to the nearest admiral. One look at me and he called the guards. So I shot him."

"One less to rescue," she said with satisfaction.

"Not quite. I used a sleeping needle. No one heard what he said, so I slipped away and the opening is sealed; but that is not what is bothering me."

"I know you haven't been drinking, but you don't sound too lucid."

"Sorry. It was the admiral. When he dropped over I saw his wrists. There were red marks like scars around both of them."

"So?" she asked in obvious puzzlement—then her face went suddenly pale. "No, it couldn't possibly be?"

I nodded slowly, finding it impossible to smile. "The gray men. I could recognize their handiwork anywhere."

They gray men. Just thinking of them sent a chill down my back—a back, I must add, that is not chill-prone very often. While I am strong and brave and stand up to the physical batterings of life quite well, I—like all of us—find it hard to resist direct assaults on my gray matter. The brain has no defenses once the inputs of the body have been bypassed. Plug an electrode into the pleasure center of an experimental animal's brain and it keeps pushing the button that supplies the electric fix until it dies of hunger or thirst. Dies happily.

Some years ago, while involved in straightening out a little matter of planetary invasion, I had been cast in the róle of experimental animal. The gray men had been the secret power behind the invasion forces and it had been my bad luck to be captured by them. They were—are!—masters of psychological torture, feeding false memories directly to the brain cells. In my particular case the memory I received, without the event having happened, was the sight of both of my hands being cut off at the wrist. Not nice. When I had come to after this bilateral amputation I found red scars and stitch marks on my wrists, as though the hands had been sewn back on. This I did not accept, and future events had proven me right. The amputation had all been a false memory, and the marks were just superficial scars.

This series of events had been one of the most unpleasant I had suffered in a lifetime of interesting experiences. I did not enjoy being reminded of it. But the facts were inescapable. The gray men were back in business, using the same technique of mental torture, using it on a bunch of old admirals who had led happy lives of quiet inefficiency.

"The gray men must be here," I said. "Working with the aliens. No wonder the admirals are coöperating. Being firmly structured in the physical world of commands and obedience they are perfect targets for brain-stomping."

"You must be right—but how is it possible? The aliens hate all humans and certainly wouldn't work with the gray men. Nasty as they are they are still human."

As soon as she said it that way I saw the answer clearly. I smiled and embraced her and kissed her, which we both enjoyed, then held her at arm's length since she was a great distraction to clear thought.

"Now hear this, my love. I think I see a way out of this entire mess. All of the details aren't clear—but I know what you must do. Could you bring the boys and a crowd of those Cill Airne back here? Go up through the floor, shoot the guards, put the admirals to sleep, then carry them away?"

"I could arrange that, but it would be a little dangerous. How would we get them clear?"

"That's what I will take care of. If I had this entire planet in a turmoil, no one knowing what was happening next or who to take orders from or anything—would that make the job easier?"

"It would certainly simplify things. What do you plan to do?"

"If I told you you might say that it was too dangerous and would forbid me. Let me say only that it must be done and that I am the only one to do it. I am off in my alien disguise, and you have two hours to assemble the troops. As soon as things start falling apart, make your move. Get them all to some safe spot, preferably near the spacedrome. I'll get back to my sleeping quarters as soon as I can. Have a guide waiting there for me. But make sure that he knows that he is to wait no more than one hour for me to show up. What I have

to do will be done by that time, and I will get back. There should be no problems. But if there are and I'm not there, he is to report right back to you. I can take care of myself as you know. And we can't jeopardize everything by waiting for one person. When the guide reports back, with or without me, you go. Grab a spaceship then at the height of the confusion, and leave this place."

"And about time too. I'll expect you back." She kissed me but did not look happy. "You're not going to tell me what you are going to do?"

"No. If I told you I would have to listen too and then I might not do it. But it does involve three things. Finding the gray men, turning them over to our alien friends—then getting out of it myself."

"Well you do that. But don't skip any of the steps—particularly the last one."

We climbed into our various disguises and departed quickly before we changed our minds. Angelina clattered off with knowledgeable tread, and I thudded off in the opposite direction. I thought I knew the way but must have made a wrong turning. Looking for a shortcut back to the upper levels, I managed to fall through a rusted plate in the decking into what must have been a covered-over lake or underground reservoir. In any case I thrashed on for quite awhile in the darkness, my course lit only by my glowing eyes, until I found the far end. There was no obvious way out, but I settled that by dropping a grenade from my cloaca and flicking it against the wall with a twitch of my tail. It crumped nicely, and I crawled through the smoky opening back into the light of day, just in time to see an officer with a patrol of nasties trotting up to see what was the trouble.

"Help, ohh help, please," I moaned, staggering in small circles with my claws pressed to my forehead. Thankfully, the officer was also a TV news watcher.

"Sweet Sleepery—what is bothering you?" it cried aloud emotionally, showing me about five thousand rotten fangs and a meter or two of damp purple throat.

"Treachery! Treachery in our midst," I cried. "Send a message to your CO to order an emergency meeting of the War Council—then take me there at once."

It was done instantly, and they took me at my word by wrapping a thousand sucker-tipped tentacles around me and rushing me off my feet. This made the trip easier and saved my batteries, and I was refreshed and relaxed when they finally dropped me at the door to the conference room.

"You are all repugnant lads, and I shall never forget you," I shouted. They cheered and slapped their suckers against the deck with wet shlurping sounds, and I galloped into the conference.

"Treason, treachery, betrayal!" I cried.

"Take your seat and make your statement in the proper form after the meeting is correctly opened," the secretary said. But a thing like a purple whale with terminal hemorrhoids was more sympathetic.

"Gentle Jeem, you seem disturbed. We have heard that there has been mayhem in your quarters, and all we can find of the noble Gar-Baj is his tail, which doesn't say very much. Can you elucidate?"

"I can—and will, if the secretary will let me."

"Ohh, get on with it then," the secretary grumbled ungraciously, looking more and more like a squashed black frog with every passing moment. "Meeting called to order, Sleepery Jeem speaking *re* certain grave charges."

"It's like this," I explained to the attentive War Council. "We of Geshtunken have certain rare abilities—in addition to being inordinately

sexy, I mean." They appreciated this last, and there was a lot of squishy banging on the furniture and wet smacking sounds. "Thank you, and the same to you. Now one thing we can do is smell very good—yes, I know, we smell *good* too, sit down boy, you're in the way. As I was saying, my keen sense of smell led me to believe that there was something not strictly kosher about this planet. I sniffed and sniffed well—and I sniffed out *humans*!"

Through the cries of shocked horror I heard shouts of "Cill Airne!" and I acknowledged them with a nod of my head.

"No, not the Cill Airne, the natives of this planet. I detected their traces at once; but they are like mouse droppings, and I know the extermination corps is surely taking good care of them. No, I mean humans right here in our midst! We have been penetrated!"

That rocked them back, and I let them shout and writhe a bit while I sharpened my claws with a file. Then I raised my paws for silence, and there it was in an instant. Every eye, large, small, stalked, green, red, or soggy, was on me. I walked slowly forward.

"Yes. They are among us. Humans. Doing their best to sabotage our lovely war of extermination. And I am going to reveal one to you—*right now*!"

My leg motors hummed and my power plant grew warm as I sprang into the air with a mighty leap. Sailing in an arc through the air, twenty meters or more. Graceful too. Landing with a horrible crunch that set my shock absorbers groaning. Dropping down—crash—onto the secretary's desk, which crushed nicely. Paws extended so that my claws sank through the secretary's damp black hide. Picking him up and waving him about as he writhed and shouted.

"You're mad. Let me down! I'm no more human than you are!"

That was what made my mind up. Up until this moment it had all been guesswork. The gray men were here, they must be disguised, and the only four-limbed creature other than myself was the secretary—in the position of power to run things, the only really organized alien I had yet encountered. But it was still just guesswork until he had spoken. Roaring with victory I hooked a recently-sharpened claw into the front of his throat.

Dark liquid spurted out and he screamed hoarsely.

I gulped and almost hesitated. Was I wrong? Was I going to dismember the secretary of the War Council right in front of the council itself? I had a feeling they would not take that too well. No! It was for only a microsecond that I hesitated—then I tore on. I had to be right. I ripped out his throat, sliced open his neck—then ripped his head off.

There was a shocked silence as the head bounced and squashed on the floor. Then a gasp from all sides.

Inside the first head was another head. A pallid, scowling human head. The secretary *was* a gray man.

While the council was shocked into immobility, the gray man was not. He pulled a gun from a gill slit and leveled it at me. Which of course I had been expecting, and I brushed it aside. I was not as quick when he grabbed out a microphone from his other gill and began shouting into it in a strange language.

I wasn't as fast because this was just what I wanted him to do. I gave him more than enough time to get out the message before I grabbed away the microphone. Then he kicked out and got me in the stomach and I folded, gasping and unmoving as he vanished through a trapdoor in the floor.

Recovering quickly, I waved away all offers of aid.

"Care not for me," I croaked, "for the blow was mortal. Avenge me! Send out the alarm to grab all the other black ploppies like the secretary. Let none escape! Go now!"

They went, and I had to roll aside before I was trampled in the rush. Then I thrashed and expired, in case anyone was watching, and peeked through one half-closed eyelid until they were all gone.

Only then did I blow open the locked trapdoor and follow the gray man.

How could I follow him?, it might be asked, and I will be happy to answer. During the struggle I had stuck a little neutrino generator into his artificial hide, that is how. A zippy neutrino can pass, undeflected and unstopped, through the entire mass of a planet. The metal of this city's construction would surely not interfere with them in the slightest. Need I add that I had a directional neutrino detector built into my snout? I never go on a mission without a few simple preparations.

The illuminated needle pointed that way, and down. I went that way, and down at the first stairwell, because I wanted to find out just what the gray men were doing on this planet. My fleeing secretary would lead me to their lair.

He did one better than that. He led me to their ship.

When I saw light ahead I treaded more slowly, then peered from the darkness of the tunnel at a great domed chamber. In the center was a dark gray spacer, while from all sides the gray men were appearing, some running, undisguised; others still hopping and splotching in their alien garb. Rats leaving a sinking ship. All my doing. The confusion across the planet would now be at its height—and the admirals would be rescued. All working according to plan.

Though I hadn't thought to find their ship. From the look of it they were making a hasty withdrawal, and this was too good an opportunity to miss. How could they be traced? There were machines that could be attached to make following the ship easy, but—just for a change—I didn't have one on me. An oversight. Particularly since the smallest weighed about 90 kilos. So what could I do?

My mind was made up for me when the metal net dropped and they swarmed all over me.

I was fighting, and doing well, when someone started on my head with a metal bar. I couldn't move it away, and the alien head got crushed in.

Mine, too, an instant later.

X.

My first thought when I woke up was the strong wish to be unconscious again. To say that I ached all over is a hilarious understatement; I felt as though I had been drawn sideways under a very low door. So I lay there for a bit, eyes resolutely closed against the glare, waiting until I felt better. After a measureless period I realized I was feeling worse if anything. But I do hate to give in to the frailties of the body so, taking a deep breath, I tried to sit up.

Only to discover that I was clamped down in a number of places. With the result that my head jerked up—then bounced back down on something exceedingly hard. Light and pain flared behind my eyes and the whole world went black for the second time.

I was learning. I didn't do it a third time. I crept back to consciousness slowly, moving each limb carefully to see if it functioned. They did, but each was held down by a binding of some kind. The ceaseless light still glared down, and it took all the will I had to pry one eye open slowly. It did the headache no good. Eventually both eyes were open and I could look around at my prison.

Very efficient, very escape-proof was my first reaction. Metal walls, ceiling, and floor. A single bright light above me, steel shackles to hold me to said floor. Otherwise, nothing. No food or water, I noticed, and was instantly beset by a raging hunger and thirst.

"Water!" I croaked, and instantly regretted it as my head pulsated with the echoes.

Yet it worked. Within minutes a door clanked open somewhere out of sight in the direction of my feet, and a gray man stamped in with a bowl of water and some very sorry-looking space rations. Instead of giving them to me he only stood, looking down, with an expression that was definitely not one filled with human kindness.

"Come on, waiter," I growled. "Just because the food is miserable it doesn't mean the service has to be the same."

"We know who you are, diGriz," he said in a drab voice. "You have caused us much trouble in the past. All of the information you have will be extracted from you, and you will then be terminated."

After this cheering bit of information, he set the containers down near my head and un-

locked the shackle on my left arm. I, of course, instantly grabbed for his ankle. He stepped back and stamped down hard on my fingers, then stood by in silence while I sucked the crushed members and muttered curses at him around them. He was as indifferent to this as to my other attempts at conversation, waiting in silence until my verbal motor ran down and I ate and drank the ration. Then, still without a word, he pinned my wrist under his boot, shackled the free arm again, picked up the empty dishes and left. The only sound he made was the rattle of the key as he locked the door.

"Blabbermouth!" I shouted after him, then looked gloomily at what I could see of the ruins of my clothing. They had apparently used detectors to find the gadgetry hidden about my person, then ripped away my clothes to get at it. Also, as a number of sore spots indicated, they had taken bits of skin as well when the offending devices were attached to it.

There was nothing I could do. Period. Day followed day—the light was never turned out—through a slough of absolute boredom, while drab meal followed identical drab meal, until we arrived. I could feel the vibration of landing jets through the floor, then the thud as we set down. I did not know where we were, and I was sure that nothing good would happen to me here—yet I still cheered up. Anything was better than another eternity shackled to the metal floor in, what I must admit, were decidedly messy circumstances. When they came to get me I did what I could to prepare myself at least mentally, if not physically, for an escape attempt. We had landed and would be leaving the ship soon. They were taking me some place where it was guaranteed not-very-good-things would happen to me. I did not yet know what they were, and—as far as I was concerned—life would be far more peaceful if I never found out. But we would leave this ship, and—even for a very brief spell—we would be in transit. That would be the time to act. The mere fact that I did not have the slightest idea of what would be waiting outside was completely and totally beside the point. I had to do something.

Not that they made it very easy for me. I tried to act indifferent when they unlocked my clamps and produced a metal collar and snapped it around my neck. Although my blood turned chill on the instant. I had worn that collar before. A thin cable ran from it to a small box that one of them held in his hand.

"No need to demonstrate," I said in what was meant to be a light and bantering tone and certainly was not. "I've worn one of these before and your friend Kraj—you must remember Kraj?—demonstrated its working to me over quite a period of time."

"I can do this," my captor said, poising a finger over one of the many buttons on the box.

"It's been done," I shouted, pulling back. "Those very same words, I know, you never change your routines. You press the button and . . ."

Fire washed over me. I was blind, burning to death, my skin aflame, my eyes seared out. Every one of my pain nerves switched on to full by the neural currents generated by the box. I knew this but it did not help. The pain was real, and it went on and on and on.

When it ended I found myself lying on the floor, curled up, drained of energy and almost helpless. Two of them lifted me to my feet and dragged me, legs flopping, down the corridor. My master with the box walked behind, giving me a little tug on the neck from time to time to remind me who was in charge. I did not argue with him. I could stumble along by myself after a bit, but they still kept their hands locked tight on my arms.

I liked that. I fought hard not to smile. They were so sure I could not escape.

"Getting cold out?" I asked when we reached the airlock. No one bothered to answer me. But they were pulling on gloves and fur hats, which certainly meant something. "How about some gloves for me?" I was still ignored.

When the lock door swung open I knew why the preparations. A swirl of snow was blown in a wave of arctic air that chilled, then numbed. It certainly wasn't summer outside. I was dragged forth into the blizzard.

Maybe not a blizzard, but some heavy flurries. There was a blinding wave of flakes about us that was gone in a few moments. A thin sun shone down on the blindingly white landscape. Snow, stretching away in all directions. Wait, something dark ahead, a stone wall or building of some kind, obscured an instant later. We plodded on and I tried to ignore the numbness in my hands and face. Yet our destination was still a good two hundred meters away. My body and feet were warm enough, but my exposed skin was something else again.

We were roughly halfway from the ship to our waiting warm haven when another miniblizzard swept down upon us, a roaring snow squall. Just before it hit I slipped and fell, pulling one of my captors down with me as he slipped on the icy surface. He made no com-

plaint, though the sadist holding the torture box did give me a quick blast of pain as a warning to watch my step. All done in silence—silence on my part too because I had managed to get a loop of cable from the box over my shoulder when I went down and then caught it in my mouth. And bit it in two.

This is not as hard to do as it sounds, since under the caps on my front teeth were set serrated edges of silicon carbide. They were invisible to x-ray, having the same density as the enamel of my teeth, but were as hard as tool steel. The caps on my teeth chipped and splintered away as I ground down, chewing desperately before anyone noticed what was happening. The swirling snow concealed what I was doing for the vital seconds needed. The human jaw muscles can exert 35 kilos of pressure on each side and I was exerting, chomping and biting to my utmost.

The cable parted. As it did I twisted to the side and brought my knee up into the groin of my captor on the right. He grunted loudly and folded and released my arm. For a quick cross chop into the throat on the other man. Then my hands were free and I spun about.

The man behind me lost vital seconds depending on technology rather than on his reflexes. My back was to him all the time I was chopping up his partners. And he did nothing—nothing, that is, other than push wildly at the buttons on the torture box. He was still pushing when my foot caught him in the pit of the stomach. As he fell I got under him so he collapsed onto my shoulder.

I did not stop to see who was doing the yelling as I staggered off with him into the snow-filled, storm-beaten, frozen wastes.

All of this may seem like madness—but what greater madness to go quietly to the slaughter at the hands of these creatures? I had been there once before and still had the scars. Now there was a good chance I would freeze to death. But that was also better than giving in to them. Plus the very remote chance that I might stay free for awhile, cause them trouble, anything.

Nor was I as weak as I pretended to be; this had been only a simple ruse to get them off guard. Though now I was weakening—and freezing—very fast. My limp ex-captor weighed at least as much as I did which necessarily slowed my pace. Yet I kept going, at right angles to our previous track, until I stumbled and fell headfirst into the snow. My face and hands were too numb to feel anything.

People were calling out on all sides, but none

were in sight at the moment as the snow swirled down heavily. My fingers were like thick clubs as I pawed the man's hat from his head and put it on mine. It was almost impossible to open the closures on his suit but I managed it finally. Then plunged my arms inside, pushing my hands up into his armpits. They burned worse than the the torture had, as feeling began to return.

Unconscious as he was, this chill clasp brought the gray man around. As soon as his eyes opened I pulled one hand out just long enough to make a fist and drive it into his jaw. He slept better then; and I crouched there, half-covered with snow, until most of the pain had gone. One of the pursuers went by, very close, but never saw us. I felt no compunction in taking my captive's clothes and gloves, though I noticed he was stirring again as I pushed off through the snowdrifts.

Of course I ran back towards the ship. The gray men, creatures of limited imagination, would automatically imagine that an escaped prisoner would want to escape. So I retraced our steps *back* towards the ship, deserted now I was happy to see, waited until my course was covered by a snow flurry, then ran towards the

nearest building that appeared out of the snow, around the corner and into the man who was standing there.

"Do not atempt to escape," he said, grinding his gun into my stomach.

XI.

Of course I did get ready for the attempt. Slippery Jim laughs, ha-ha, at guns in stomach. There were a number of interesting and lethal ways to reverse the situation but even as I was tensing my muscles the man spoke again.

"The weapon was just to stop you from attacking instantly, diGriz. I know your reputation. Take the gun." He reversed the pistol and handed it to me; I grasped it by reflex. "Now follow me to a safe hiding place I have prepared."

I followed. I had little choice. Still I swiveled my head about until my neck hurt, looking for any possible trap. There was none. The man led me to a door which opened into happy and dark warmth. He locked this behind us and, still in darkness, felt his way through a succession of three more doors, all of which he unlocked and resealed when we had passed. The final chamber must have been windowless because he turned on the lights as soon as he had closed the door. I spun about, gun ready, finding nothing except large packing cases. Then turned my attention to him.

He was old, very old. His yellowed skin hung in wattles at his neck and I could see the palsied vibration of his fingers. Only his eyes were youthful, bright and alive, studying me as intently as I studied him.

"My name is Hanasu," he said. "I followed the reports that you had been captured and identified as the one who caused us so much trouble in the past. Knowing your record I was sure you would attempt to escape upon arrival, and probably succeed. If this happened you were sure to double back. That is why I waited."

"You're very smart." I tried to sneer when I said it, knowing I had been out-thunk right down the line.

"Yes, but I am the only one. The rest are of limited intelligence and imagination and will think you have frozen to death in the snow. Now I will tell you about myself. You must know certain things if you are to understand why I am helping you. My function is that of headmaster of the Yurisareta School, where our young are trained. It may appear a position of strength, but it is quite the opposite. I was exiled there as punishment. They would have killed me, but they did not dare."

"I haven't the slightest idea what you are talking about. Would you care to explain?"

"Of course. The Committee of Ten rule this planet. I was on this committee for many years. I am an extremely good organizer. I originated and guided the entire Cliaand operation. When it was terminated, thanks to your efforts, I returned and became First of the Committee. That was when I attempted to alter our programs and they punished me for it. I have been at the school ever since. I cannot leave there nor can I alter one word of the program, which is fixed and immutable. It is a very safe prison.

This was getting more and more interesting. "What changes did you try to make?"

"Radical ones. I began to doubt all of our aims. I had been exposed to other cultures, corrupted they said, so I began to question ours more and more. But as soon as I tried to put my new ideas into force I was apprehended, removed, sent to the school. There can be no new ideas on Kekkonshiki. My trouble is that I am too intelligent. I was first in all my classes, then first on the Committee. During the years I have given this much thought and have concluded that most of the people on this planet are both stupid and unimaginative. Intelligence and imagination are handicaps to basic survival in an environment as harsh as ours. We have selectively bred them out. Which means I am a sport, a mutant. These differences lay dormant during my early years. I believed everything I was taught and excelled in my studies. I did not question then because questioning is unknown here. Obedience is all. Now I question. We are not superior to all of the rest of mankind—just different. Our attempts to destroy or rule them all were wrong, our liaison with the aliens to war on our own species the biggest crime of all."

"You're right," I said. Hanasu went on as though he had not heard me.

"When I discovered these facts I tried to change our aims. But it is impossible. I cannot even change one word of the training the children get—and I am in charge of the school."

"I can change everything," I told him.

"Of course," he said, turning to face me. Then his immobile face cracked, the corners of his mouth turned up. He smiled, ever so slightly—but it was still a smile. "Why do you think I contacted you? You can do what I have labored my lifetime to accomplish: save the

people of this chill planet from themselves."

"One message would do it. Just the location of this planet."

"And then—your League would come and destroy us. It is tragic but inevitable."

"No. Wouldn't harm a hair of your heads."

"That is a jest and I do not like it! Do not mock me!" There was almost a trace of anger in his voice.

"It's the truth. You just don't know how civilized populations react. I admit that a lot of citizens, if they knew who you were, would relish dropping a planet buster onto you. But with luck the general public will never know. The League will just keep an eye on your people to see that they don't cause any more trouble. And offer you the usual aid and assistance."

He was baffled. "I don't understand. They must kill us—"

"Stop with the killing already. That's your trouble. Live or die. Kill or be killed. That philosophy belongs to a darker stage of mankind's development which we have hopefully left behind. We may not have the best of all possible ethical systems or civilizations, but we at least have one that forbears violence as an institution. Why do you think your alien friends are doing so well? We no longer have armies or fleets to fight wars. We no longer have wars. Until people like yours come along and try to turn the clock back twenty thousand years or so. There is no need for killing as a tool of government. Ever."

"There must be the rule of law. If a man kills he must be killed in return."

"Nonsense. That does not bring the dead back to life. And the society doing the killing then becomes no more than a murderer itself. And I see your mouth open for the next argument. Capital punishment is no deterrent to others, that has been proven. Violence breeds violence, killing breeds killing."

Hanasu paced back and forth the length of the storeroom, trying to understand these—to him—alien concepts.

"These things you tell me—they are beyond understanding. I must study them, but that is not important now. What is important is that I have made my mind up. I have been thinking about it for years and have decided. The Kekkonshiki plans must be stopped. There has been too much death. It is only fit that it end by all of us being killed. You have told me this will not happen, and I would like to believe you. But it does not matter. The message must be sent to your league. You will do that."

"I'll be overjoyed to. But doesn't that involve leaving this planet?"

"It does. And I have arranged that. The name of this planet is Kekkonshiki and on this paper are its spatial coordinates." He passed it over as simply as that. The end of his world; the end of an era. He had the courage of his convictions. "We will not delay. In these crates you see are various currencies obtained from the aliens. They are used to buy the supplies we need for survival on this barren planet. There are a number of trading worlds where anything is for sale if you have the right price. The ship will load these crates and proceed to one of them as soon as it is refueled. I have prepared a compartment concealed in the largest crate. You have the gun and your wits so you should be able to escape when you reach the destination. Here is where you will hide. Any questions?"

I looked at the black opening, the thin blankets, the racked flasks of water, and could think of a thousand questions. None of any real importance. If this were a trap—I was trapped. If it was on the level I would be free. No amount of questioning of the old man would reveal which was which.

"Thanks, Hanasu," I said, and climbed inside. "I'll be back with the troopers, and you'll see how well it works out."

He nodded and closed the lid.

I'll not say I enjoyed the trip, though after being banged about and loaded aboard the ship I began to feel the escape was on the up and up. I was sure of it when we took off. It's a good thing I am not prone to claustrophobia because this was the right spot for a screaming attack. Instead I practiced a bit of self-hypnotism to keep myself in semiconsciousness for the voyage, snapping out instantly when the crate was moved. There was plenty more banging about, then the working of catches and I knew the top cover had been removed. So I threw my switch and squinted my eyes against the glare as my own lid popped open. Two gaping Kekkonshiki stared down at me, along with some uniformed customs officers. While the enemy was still staring I grabbed their necks and thudded their heads together with great enthusiasm.

"That felt good," I said, rising from my tomb. "Now, if you gentlemen will take me to your boss you will hear a story the likes of which will astound and amaze you. And quickly, if you don't mind. There is still a war to be won."

XII.

There was a League scoutship in the area, and it grounded before the day was out. By the time it came I had convinced the locals that trading with the enemy was frowned upon, but they would be forgiven if they put the crew of the ship behind bars—which they did with alacrity. The scoutship blasted off as soon as I was aboard, and by the time we reached the League Satellite Station I had all of my messages written. Something big with a lot of guns and a full complement of troopers would be spared from the war to bring civilization to the Kekkonshiki natives. There were exact instructions on how they were to find Hanasu and put him in charge of the pacification. Justice, revenge, and everything else could come later. Right now it was important just to neutralize the gray men to guard our flank. The war still had to be won. I read all the reports in the ship, and by the time I had reached the Special Corps Main Base I had a number of plans made. All of them were driven from my mind by the sight of the svelte figure of the woman I loved.

"Air . . ." I gasped after a number of minutes of close and passionate embrace. "It's nice to be home."

"There's more in store, but I assume you want to look after the war a bit first."

"If you don't mind, precious mine. Did you have any trouble admiral-saving?"

"None. You had everything in a lovely turmoil. The boys learn fast and are very good at this sort of job. They are also off now in the navy, doing important things. I worried about you."

"You had very good reason to—but it's all over now. You didn't, by chance, happen to pick up any souvenirs when you were passing through that alien treasury?"

"I left that to the twins, who take after their father. I'm sure they pinched a good bit for themselves, but what they passed on will make us independently wealthy for life. If we live."

"The war, of course." My elation turned to depression at the thought. "What is happening?"

"Nothing good. As you observed, the aliens on their own are a little on the stupid side. Once the gray men were out of the picture leadership must have been divided. But there still must have been a few commanders left who were bright enough to come in out of the rain, because they launched an all-out attack. Left their base completely. Just took everything they had and came after us. So we ran and are still running. Just picking away at their fringes to let them think we will stand and fight. But we can't afford to. They outnumber us and outgun us at least a thousand to one."

"How long can this last?"

"Not much longer, I'm afraid. We're almost past all of our inhabited planets and will be coming out soon in intergalactic space. After that we can retreat no more. Or if we do, the uglies will see what we are doing; and even they are smart enough to figure this one out. All they have to do then is leave a small force to keep us at bay, then they can turn and start attacking our planetary bases."

"You don't make it sound too good."

"It isn't."

"Do not worry, my sweet." I clutched her and kissed her a bit more. "But your own little Slippery Jim will save the Galaxy."

"Again. That's nice."

"I was ordered to come here," a familiar voice said. "Just to see you kissing and hugging. Don't you know there is a war on? I'm a busy man."

"Not as busy as you are going to be soon, Professor Coypu."

"What do you mean?" He shouted angrily and clashed his protruding incisors in my direction.

"I mean you are about to make the weapon that will save us all and your name will ring down through the history books forever. Coypu, Galaxy Saviour."

"You're mad."

"Don't you think you're the first one to ever say that. All geniuses are called mad. Or worse. I read a highly secret report that you now believe in parallel universes. . . ."

"Silence, you fool! No one was to know. Especially you!"

"An accident, really. A safe just happened to fall open when I was passing, and the report dropped out. Is it true?"

"True, true," he muttered, tapping his fingernails on his teeth unhappily. "I had the clue from your escapade with the time-helix when you were trapped in a loop of time in a bit of past history that did not exist."

"It existed for me."

"Of course. Just what I said. Therefore, if one possible different past could exist, then an infinity of different pasts—and presents—must exist. That's logical."

"It certainly is," I cheered. "So you experimented."

"I did. I have gained access to parallel uni-

verses, made observations and notes. But how does this save the Galaxy?"

"One more question first, if you please. Is it possible to pass through into these other universes?"

"Of course. How else could I have made my observations? I sent a small machine through to make readings, take photographs."

"How big a machine can you send through?"

"It depends on the power of the field."

"Fine. Then that is the answer."

"It may be an answer to you, Slippery Jim," Angelina said with some puzzlement, "but it doesn't make much sense to me."

"Ahh, but just think, lover mine, what can be done with a machine like that. You mount it on a battleship with plenty of power. The battleship joins our space fleet and the fighting begins with the enemy. Our forces flee, the battleship limps behind, the enemy rushes up, the field is turned on—"

"And every one of those awful creepy-crawlies and all of their guns and things zip right through into another universe and the menace is over forever!"

"I was thinking of something roughly like that," I said modestly, polishing my fingernails on my chest. "Can we do it, Coypu?"

"It is possible, possible. . . ."

"Then let us get to your lab and look at the gadget and see if the possible can be turned into the tangible."

Coypu's newest invention did not look like very much at all. Just a lot of boxes, wires, and assorted gadgetry spread all over the room. But he was proud of it.

"Still in rough shape, as you can see," he said. "Breadboarded components. I call it my parallelilizer. . . ."

"I would hate to say that three times fast."

"Don't joke, diGriz! This invention will change the fate of the known universe and at least one unknown one."

"Don't be so touchy," I said soothingly. "Your genius will not go unmarked, Prof. Now, would you be so kind as to demonstrate how your parallelilizer works."

Coypu sniffed and muttered to himself while he made adjustments on the machine, threw switches, and tapped dials. The usual thing. While he was busy I was busy too, giving Angelina a quick hug, and she hugged right back. The professor, wrapped up in his work, never noticed that we were wrapped up in ours. He lectured away while we snogged.

"Precision, that is the important thing. The various parallel universes are separated only by the probability factor, which is very thin, as you can well imagine. To pick just one probability out of all the countless possible ones is the trickiest part of the operation. Of course the probabilities that vary the least from ours are the closest, while completely changed probability universes are the most distant and require the most power. So for this demonstration I will take the nearest one and open the portal to it, *so!*"

A last switch was thrown and the lights dimmed as the machine sucked in all the available power. On all sides machines hummed and sparkled, and the sharp smell of ozone filled the air. I let go of Angelina and looked around carefully.

"You know, professor," I said. "As far as I can see, absolutely nothing has happened."

"You are a cretin! Look, there, through the field generator."

I looked at the big metal frame that was wrapped with copper wire and glowing warmly. I could still see nothing and I told Coypu so. He screeched in anger and tried to pull out some of his hair, failing in this since he was almost bald.

"Look through the field and you see the parallel universe on the other side."

"All I can see is the lab."

"Moron. That is not *this* laboratory, but the one on the other world. It exists there just as it does here."

"Wonderful," I said, smiling, not wanting to offend the old boy. Though I really thought he was crackers. "You mean if I wanted to I could just step through the screen and be in the other world?"

"Possibly. But you might also be dead. So far I have not attempted to pass living matter through the screen."

"Isn't it time you tried?" Angelina asked, clutching my arm. "Only with some living matter other than my husband."

Still muttering, Coypu exited and returned with a white mouse. Then he put the mouse in a clamp, fixed the clamp to a rod, then slowly pushed the mouse through the screen. Absolutely nothing appeared to happen other than that the wriggling mouse managed to squirm out of the clamp and drop to the floor. It scuttled aside and vanished.

"Where did it go?" I asked, blinking rapidly.

"It is in the parallel world, as I explained."

"The poor thing looked frightened," Angelina said. "But it didn't appear to be hurt in any way."

"Tests will have to be made," Coypu said.

"More mice, microscopic examinations of tissue, spectroscopic determination of factors . . ."

"Normally yes, Prof," I said. "But this is war and we just don't have the time. There is one real time saver that will enable us to find our right now—"

"*No!*" Angelina called out, being faster on the uptake than the professor. But she said it too late.

Because even as she called out I was stepping through the screen.

XIII.

The only sensation I felt was sort of a mild tingle, though even this might have just been a product of my fevered imagination since I was expecting to feel something. I looked around and everything looked very much the same to me—though of course all of the parallelilizer equipment was missing.

"Jim diGriz, you come back at once—or I'll come after you," Angelina said.

"In just a moment. This is a momentous instant in the history of science and I want to experience it fully."

It was disconcerting to look back through the screen and find that the view of the other lab—as well as Angelina and the professor—vanished when I walked off to one side. From the front the field itself was invisible, though when I walked around behind it, it was clearly visible as a black surface apparently floating in space. Out of the corner of my eye I saw something move; the mouse scuttling behind a cabinet. I hoped that he liked it here. Before returning I felt I had to mark the important moment some way. So I took out my stylus and wrote SLIPPERY JIM WAS HERE on the wall. Let them make of that what they will. At that moment the door started to open and I instantly nipped back through the screen. I had no desire to meet whoever was coming in. It might even be a parallel-world duplicate of me, which would be disconcerting.

"Very interesting," I said. Angelina hugged me and Coypu turned off his machine. "How big can you make the screen?" I asked.

"There is no physical or theoretical limit on its size since it doesn't exist. Now I am using metal coils to contain the field, but they are dispensable in theory. Once I am able to project the field without material containment it will be big enough to send the entire alien fleet through."

"My thought exactly, professor. So, back to your drawing board and get cracking. Meanwhile, I'll break the news to our masters."

Calling together all of the Chiefs of Staff was not easy since they were deeply involved in running the war, if not in winning it. In the end I had to work through Inskipp, who used the powers of the Special Corps to call the meeting. Since they were using this base as headquarters for defense they found it hard to ignore the call of their landlord. I was waiting when they arrived, crisp and shining in a new uniform with a number of real medals, and a few fakes, pinned to my chest. They grumbled to each other, lit large cigars, and scowled in my direction. As soon as they were all seated I rapped for attention.

"Gentlemen, at the present time we are losing the war."

"We didn't have to come here to have you tell us that," Inskipp snarled. "What's up, diGriz?"

"I brought you here to tell you that the end of the war is now in sight. We win."

That caught their notice, all right. Every grizzled head was now leaning in my direction, every yellowed or drooping eye fixed upon me.

"This will be accomplished through the use of a new device called the parallelilizer. With its aid, the enemy fleet will fly into a parallel universe and we will never see them again."

"What is this madman talking about?" an admiral grumbled.

"I am talking about a concept so novel that even my imaginative mind has difficulty grasping it, and I expect that your fossilized ones can't understand it at all. But try." A deep growl ran through the room with that, but at least I had their attention now. "The theory goes like this. We can time travel to the past, but we cannot change the past. Since we obviously make changes by going into the past, those changes are already part of the past of the present we are living in." A number of eyes turned glassy at this but I pressed on. "However if major changes are made in the past we end up with a different past for a different present. One we don't know about since we are not living in it, but one that is real for the people who do exist there. These alternate time lines, or parallel universes, were inaccessible until the invention of the parallelilizer by our Corps genius, Professor Coypu. This device enables us to step into other parallel universes, or to fly in or get there in a number of interesting ways. The most interesting will be the generation of a screen big enough for the entire alien fleet to fly through so they will

never bother us again. Any questions?"

There certainly were, and after a half an hour of detailed explanations I think I had convinced them all that something nasty was going to happen to the aliens and the war would be over, and they certainly approved of that. There were smiles and nods, and even a few muffled cheers. When Inskipp spoke it was obvious that he spoke for them all.

"We can do it! End this terrible war! Send the enemy fleet into another universe!"

"That is perfectly correct," I said.

"IT IS FORBIDDEN," a deep voice, a disembodied voice, said, speaking apparently from the empty air over the table.

It was very impressive and at least one officer clutched at his chest, whether for his heart or some religious tract was not clear. But Inskipp, con man himself, was not conned.

"Who said that? Which one of you is the joker with the ventriloquial projector?"

There were loud cries of innocence and much looking under the furniture, all of which stopped when the voice spoke again.

"It is forbidden because it is immoral. We have spoken."

"*Who* have spoken?" Inskipp shouted.

"We are the Morality Corps."

This time the voice came from the open doorway, not out of the air, and it took an instant to realize this. One by one the heads snapped around, and every eye was fixed on the man when he came in. And very impressive he was too. Tall, with long white hair and beard, wearing a floor-length white robe. But it was hard to impress Inskipp.

"You are under arrest," he said. "Call the guards to take him away. I've never even heard of the Morality Corps."

"Of course not," the man answered in deep tones. "We are too secret for that."

"You, secret?" Inskipp sneered. "My Special Corps is so secret that most people think it is just a rumor."

"I know. That's not too secret. My Morality Corps is so secret there aren't even any rumors of its existence."

Inskipp was turning red and beginning to swell up. I stepped in quickly before he exploded. "That all sounds very interesting, but we will need a little proof, won't we?"

"Of course," he fixed me with a steely gaze. "What is your most secret code?"

"I should tell you?"

"Of course not. I'll tell you. It is the Vasarnap Cypher, is it not?"

"It might be," I equivocated.

"It is," he answered sternly. "Go then to the Top Secret computer terminal there and give it this message in that cypher. The message is REVEAL ALL ABOUT THE MORALITY CORPS."

"I'll do that," Inskipp said. "The agent di-Griz is not cleared for the Vasarnap Cypher." That's how much he knew. But all the eyes were upon him as he went to the computer terminal and rattled the keys. Then he took a cypher wheel from his pocket, plugged it into the terminal, and typed in the message. The speaker scratched and the monotone voice of the computer droned out.

"Who makes this request?"

"I, Inskipp, head of the Special Corps."

"Then I will reveal that the Morality Corps is the top priority secret force in the League. Its orders must be obeyed. The orders will be issued by the Morality Corps top executive. At the present time the top executive is Jay Hovah."

"I am Jay Hovah," the newcomer said. "Therefore I repeat. It is forbidden to send the alien invaders into a parallel world."

"Why?" I asked. "You don't mind our blowing them up, do you?"

He fixed his stern gaze upon me. "To battle in self-defense is not immoral. This is the defense of one's home and loved ones."

"Well if you don't mind our blowing them up—what is the complaint about slipping them into another world line? That won't hurt them half as much."

"It won't hurt them at all. But you will be sending ravening aliens in a giant battle fleet into a parallel universe where they did not exist before. You will be responsible for their killing all the humans in that universe. That is immoral. A way must be found to eliminate the enemy without making others suffer."

"You can't stop us," one of the admirals shouted in anger.

"I can and I will," Jay Hovah said. "It says in the Constitution of the League of United Planets that no immoral acts will be indulged in by member planets or by forces operating under the orders of member planets. You will find that a clause is included in the original agreement signed by all planetary representatives that a Morality Corps will be founded to determine what is moral. We are the top authority. We say no. Find yourself another plan."

While Jay was talking all the little wheels in my head were spinning busily. They stopped finally, and the winning numbers came up.

"Stop this bickering," I said, then had to repeat myself, shouting, before I was heard. "I

have come up with the alternative plan." This quieted them down and even Jay stopped pontificating for a bit to listen. "The Morality Corps protests that it would be an immoral act to shoot all the nasties into a parallel universe where they can work their will upon the human beings there. Is that your argument, Jay?"

"Put rather crudely, but in essence, yes."

"Then you wouldn't protest at all if we pushed the enemy into a parallel universe where there were *no* human beings?"

He opened and shut his mouth a few times at that one, then scowled fiercely. I smiled and lit a cigar. The admirals buzzed, mostly with bafflement since they weren't too bright or they wouldn't have enlisted in the peacetime navy.

"I would like a second opinion," Jay Hovah finally said.

"By all means, but make it fast."

He glared at me, but pulled out a gold pendant that hung about his neck and whispered into it. Then listened. And nodded.

"It would not be immoral to send the aliens into a universe where there were no human beings. I have spoken."

"What is happening?" a bewildered admiral asked.

"It's very simple," I told him. "There are millions, billions, probably an infinite number of parallel galaxies. Among this number there must surely be one where homo sapiens never existed. There might even be a galaxy populated only by aliens where our enemies would be made welcome."

"You have just volunteered to find the right one," Inskipp ordered. "Get moving, diGriz, and find us the best place to send that battle fleet."

"He shall not go alone," Jay Hovah announced. "We have been watching this agent for a long time, since he is the most immoral man in the Special Corps."

"Very flattering," I said.

"Therefore we do not take his word for anything. When he looks for the correct parallel galaxy one of our agents will accompany him."

"That's just fine," I told him. "But please don't forget that there is a war on; and I don't want one of your leaden-footed, psalm-singing moralists hanging around my neck." Jay was whispering instructions into his communicator. "This is a military operation and I move fast . . ."

I shut up when she walked in the door. She was from Jay's outfit, if the long robe meant anything, but it was filled quite differently from his. Some very interesting curves revealed rather than concealed. Honey-blonde hair, rose lips, shining eyes. A very attractive package in every way.

"This is agent Incuba who will accompany you," Jay said.

"Well, in that case I withdraw my objections," I smarmed. "I'm sure she is a very efficient officer. . . ."

"Oh, yes?" a voice spoke out from the thin air, the second time this day. Only this one was a female voice that I instantly recognized. *"If you think you are going galaxy-hopping alone with that sleazy sexpot, Jim diGriz, you are very mistaken. You had better book three tickets."*

XIV.

"What kind of secret war conference is this?" Inskipp howled. "Is everyone listening to it? That was your wife on the eavesdropping circuit, diGriz—wasn't it?"

"Sounded very much like her," I said a little too heartily. "I guess you ought to have the security arrangements checked out. But you'll have to take care of that yourself because I have to go look at some other galaxies and that is a time consuming business. You'll get my report soonest, gentlemen."

I exited with Incuba a few steps behind me. Angelina was waiting in the corridor, eyes glowing like a female lioness, fingernails hooked like claws. She seared my skin with one sizzling glare, then turned her destroying gaze on Incuba.

"Do you plan to wear that bathrobe for this arduous trip?" she asked, voice close to absolute zero. Incuba looked Angelina up and down, her expression unchanged although her nostrils flared ever so lightly as though she had sniffed something bad.

"Probably not. But whatever I wear it will certainly be more practical—and a good deal more attractive than *that*."

Before the warfare escalated I took the coward's way out and dropped a mini smoke grenade. It banged and puffed and took their attention off their differences for an instant. I spoke quickly.

"Ladies, we leave in one half an hour, so please be ready. I am off to the lab now to set things up with Professor Coypu, and I hope that you will join me there."

Angelina joined me now, grabbing my arm

with talons sunk deep, marching me off down the corridor, hissing words into my ear—then biting it for emphasis.

"One pass at that tramp, one look, one touch of your hand on hers, and you are a dead man, Dirty Old Jim diGriz."

"What happened to innocent-until-proven-guilty?" I groaned, rubbing the aching earlobe. "I love you and none other. Now can we drop this and get on with the war? And get Coypu to set up our investigation."

"You have only one choice of a possible galaxy," Coypu said, after I had explained the situation.

"What do you mean?" I was shocked. "Billions, an infinite number you said."

"I did. That many exist. But we can get access for a large object, such as a spaceship, to only six. After that the energy demand is too great to open a screen more than two meters in diameter. You're not going to get many aliens through a hole that big."

"Well, that's at least six universes. So why do you say only one?"

"Because in the other five this laboratory exists and I have observed myself or other humans in it. In the sixth, which I call Space Six, there is no laboratory or Corps base. The screen opens into interstellar space."

"Then that is the one we must try," a golden voice said, and Incuba tripped in through the door. She was fetchingly garbed in tight ship-suit, kinky black boots, and other interesting things that I knew better than to notice since Angelina was right behind her. I turned my gaze to Coypu, uglier but safer.

"Then that is the one we must try," I told him.

"I thought you might say that. I have the parallelilizer screen projected outside this laboratory building. It is one hundred meters in diameter. I suggest you get a spacer with a smaller diameter, and I will instruct you from there on."

"Great idea. A Lancer scoutship will just do the job."

I exited with my loyal crew right after me. I signed for the scoutship and did all the pre-flight checks with Angelina's assistance. Incuba stayed out of the control room, which made life easier to live.

"I've always wanted to see another universe," I said brightly.

"Shut up and fly this thing."

I sighed and got Coypu on the radio.

"Fly 46 degrees from your present position," he said. *"You will see a circular ring of lights."*

"Got it."

"Then go through it. And I suggest you make a careful navigation fix on the other side and drop a radio beacon as well."

"Very helpful of you. We would like to get back some day."

The spacer slipped through the ring, which vanished behind us. In the rear scopes I could see a disk of blackness occulting the stars.

"Position recorded, beacon launched," Angelina said.

"You are wonderful. I note from the recordings that there is a nice G2 star over there about 50 light years away. And the radio tells me that it was emitting radio signals some 50 years ago. Shall we go look?"

"Yes. And that's all you will be looking at!"

"My love!" I took her hands in mine. "I have eyes only for you." Then I saw that she was smiling, then laughing; and we clinched a bit. "You have been leading me on?" I accused.

"A little bit. I thought it would be fun to go on this trip, and it seemed a good reason. Also I will flay you with broken glass if you go anywhere near that Morality Corps chicken."

"No fear. I am too busy saving the Galaxy once again."

When we came out of warpdrive, Incuba joined us at the controls.

"There are two inhabited planets about that sun?" she asked.

"That is what the instruments and the radio tell us. We are taking a look-see at the nearest."

It was a quick jump by warpdrive and then we were dropping down into the atmosphere. Blue sky, white clouds, a very pleasant place. The radio was blaring out very sinister music and occasional bursts of some incomprehensible language. None of us felt like talking. What, or who, inhabited this planet was of utmost importance. Lower and lower until the landscape was clear below us.

"Houses," Angelina said, sounding very unhappy. "And plowed fields. Looks very much like home . . ."

"No, it doesn't," I shouted, turning up the magnification.

"Beautiful!" Angelina sighed, and it was. At least at this moment. Something with far too many legs was pulling a plow. Steering the plow was a very repulsive alien who would have been right at home with our present enemies.

"An alien universe!" I laughed as I spoke. "They can come here and make friends and live happily ever after. Let's go back with the

good news."

"Let us investigate the other planet," Incuba said quietly. "And as many more as we have to, to determine if humans exist here as well."

Angelina gave her a cold look and I sighed.

"Sure. That's what we must do. Look around and make sure it is all creepies. Of course it will be."

Old big mouth. We zipped over to the second inhabited planet and looked down upon mills and mines, cities and countryside. Inhabited by the most human looking humans I have ever seen."

"Maybe they are alien inside," I said, grasping at a last straw.

"Should we cut one open and find out?" Angelina asked, seriously.

"The cutting open of other creatures, human or alien, is forbidden by the Morality Corps . . ."

Incuba's words were cut off by a blast of static from the radio and shouted words in a strange language. At the same moment a number of readouts flickered and I looked at the viewscreen. And drew back.

"We have company," I said. "Shall we leave?"

"I wouldn't do anything in a hurry," Angelina cozened.

For outside, very close indeed, was a very nasty black warship. Some of the guns had gaping muzzles big enough to drive our small ship into. And I'm sure that it was not by chance that they were pointing at us. I reached for the thrust controls just as I felt a number of strong tractor beams latch onto our ship.

"I think I will flit over and talk to them," I said, rising and going to the suit locker. "Just watch the shop until I get back."

"I'm going with you," Angelina said firmly.

"Not this time, light of my life. And that is a command. If I don't get back, try and get a report through about what we have seen."

With this noble exit line I exited, suited up and floated over to the dreadnought where a port obligingly opened for me. I walked in, head up, and was cheered a bit to see that the reception party were all human. Hard-eyed types in tight black uniforms.

"*Krzty picklin stimfrx!*" the one with the most gold bullion snapped at me.

"I'm sure it's a great language, but I don't speak it."

He cocked an ear and listened—then issued a sharp order. Men ran and returned with a metal box, wires, plugs, and a nasty looking helmet. I shied away from the thing, but efficient-looking weapons were ground into my ribs, and I desisted. It was clapped over my head, adjustments were made, then the officer spoke again.

"Can you understand me now, worm of an intruder?" he asked.

"I certainly can, and there is no need for such language. We have come a long way, and I don't need any insults from you."

His lips peeled back from his teeth at that, and I thought he was going to sink them into my throat. The others present gasped with shock.

"Do you know who I am?!" he shouted.

"No, nor do I care. Because you don't know who I am. You have the pleasure of being in the presence of the first ambassador from a parallel universe. So you might say hello."

"He is telling the truth," a technician said, watching his flickering needles.

"Well, that's different," the officer said, calming instantly. "You wouldn't be expected to know the quarantine restrictions. My name is Kangg. Come have a drink and tell me what you are doing here."

The booze was not bad, and they were all fascinated by my story. Before I had finished, they sent for the ladies and we all clinked glasses.

"Well, good luck on your quest," Kangg said, raising his glass. "I don't envy you your job. But as you can see we have our alien problem licked, and the last thing we need is an invasion. Our war ended about a thousand years ago and was a close run thing. We blew up all the alien spaceships and made sure the creepos stay now on planets of their own. They are ready to go for our throats again at any time, so we keep an eye on them with patrols like mine."

"We shall return home, and I shall report it would be immoral to send the fleet here," Incuba said.

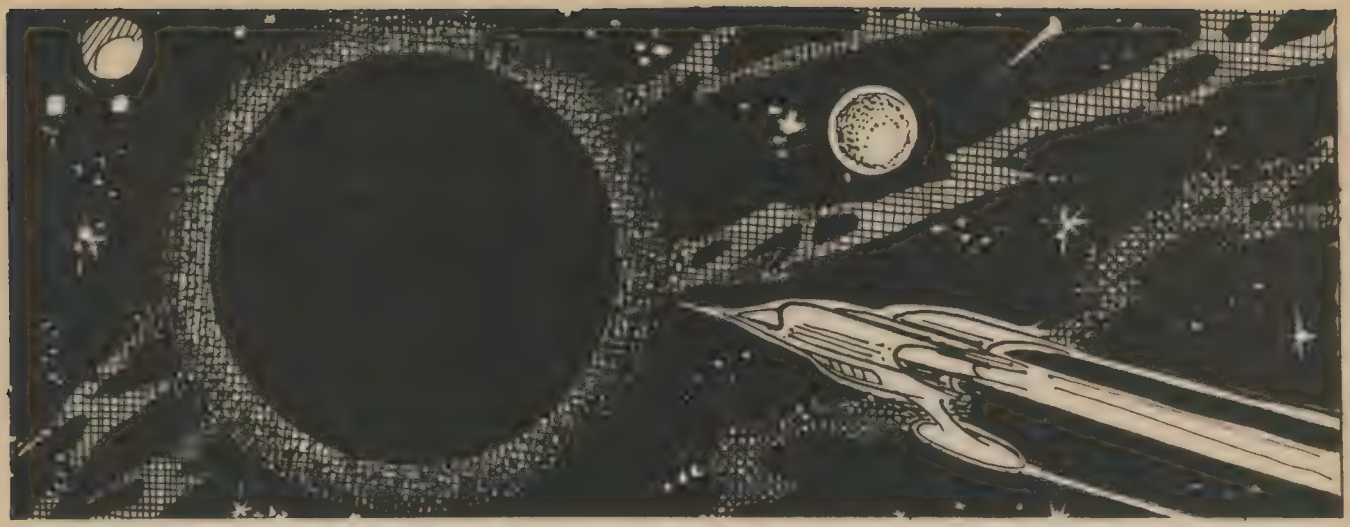
"We can loan you a few battleships," Kangg offered. "But we are really spread kind of thin."

"I'll report your offer, and thanks," I said. "But I'm afraid we need a more drastic solution. Now we have to get back because we will need an answer soon, or else."

"Hope you lick them. Those greenies can be very mean."

It was with utmost gloom that we returned to our ship and set course for the beacon. The parallel world booze must have been working in my brain, or desperation goosing it into top gear, because suddenly I had a most interesting thought.

"I have it!" I shouted with uncontrolled joy.



"The answer to our problems at last." We popped through the screen, and I made a mad landing at the nearest airlock. "Come with me and hear what it is!"

I ran, with the girls right behind me, bursting into the meeting room just as the staff chiefs were gathering in answer to my emergency call.

"Then we can send them the aliens?" Inskipp asked.

"No way. They have alien problems of their own."

"Then what do we do?" a senile admiral moaned. "Six parallel galaxies, and all of them with human beings. Where do we send the aliens?"

"To none of them," I said. "We send them somewhere else instead. I checked with Coypu, and he says it is possible, and he is muttering over the equations now."

"Where? Tell us!" Inskipp ordered.

"Why, we use time travel. We send them through time."

"Into the past?" he was puzzled.

"No, that wouldn't work. They would just be hanging around waiting for the human race to develop so they could wipe us out. So the past is no good. We send them into the future."

"You're mad, diGriz. What does that accomplish?"

"Look, we send them a hundred years into the future. And while they are en route we have all the best scientific minds of the Galaxy working on ways to knock them off. We have a hundred years to do it in. We develop something, and—a hundred years from now—our people are waiting for them when they appear, and they take care of the menace once and for all."

"Wonderful!" Angelina said. "My husband is a genius. Set up the machine and send them into the future."

"IT IS FORBIDDEN," a deep voice said from above.

XV.

The shocked silence that followed this unexpected announcement continued for a heartbeat or two, then was interrupted drastically when Inskipp whipped out his gun and began shooting holes in the ceiling.

"Secret meeting! Top security! Why don't we go on TV with this session—it would be more private!"

He foamed as he spoke and shrugged off the aged admirals who tried to stop him. I vaulted the table and disarmed him, numbing him a bit in the process so he dropped, glassy-eyed, into his chair where he muttered to himself.

"Who said that?" I called out.

"I did," a man said, appearing suddenly in midair, accompanied by a sharp popping sound. He dropped the short distance to the table, then jumped neatly to the floor.

"It beith I who spake, noble sirs. I hite Ga Binetto."

He was something interesting to look at, dressed in baggy velvet clothes with high boots, a big hat with a curly feather, and curly mustachios, which he twirled with his free hand. The other hand rested on the pommel of his sword. Since Inskipp was still muttering, I would have to talk to him.

"We don't care how tall you are—what's your name?"

"Name? Namen—verily. I am named Ga Binetto."

"What gives you the right to come barging into a secret meeting like this?"

"Forsooth, there be no secrets hidden from ye Temporal Constabulary."

"The Time Police?" This was something new. "Time travelers from the past?" This was beginning to confuse even me.

"Ods bodkins, varlet, nay! Why thinkest thou that?"

"I thinkest that because that outfit and language haven't been around for maybe 32,000 years."

He flashed me a dirty look and made some quick adjustments on some knobs on the pommel of his sword.

"Don't be so damn superior," Ga Binetto snapped. "You try hopping from time to time and learning all the disgusting languages and dialects. Then you wouldn't be so quick to . . ."

"Can we get back to business," I broke in. "You're the Time Police, but not from the past. So—let me guess—the future maybe? Just nod your head, that's right. So that's straight. Now tell us why we can't shoot those aliens through a couple of hundred years of time?"

"Because it is forbidden."

"You said that before. Now how about some reasons."

"I don't have to give you any." He leered coldly. "We could have sent an H-bomb through instead of me, so how about shutting up and listening."

"He is correct," one of the senile admirals quavered. "Welcome to our time, illustrious time traveler. Give us your instructions, if you please."

"That's more like it. Respect where respect is due, if you don't mind. All you are permitted to know is that it is the job of the Time Police to police time. We see to it that paradoxes do not occur, that major misuses of time travel, such as your proposed plan, do not happen. The very fabric of time and probability would be strained by the event should it occur. It is forbidden."

There was a gloomy silence following this news, during which time I thought furiously.

"Tell me, Ga Binetto," I said. "Are you human or an alien in disguise?"

"I'm as human as you," he said angrily. "Maybe even more so."

"That's good. Then if you are a human from the future the aliens never wiped out all the human beings in the Galaxy as they plan. Right?"

"Right."

"Then how do we win the war?"

"The war is won by . . ." He clamped his mouth shut and turned bright red. "That information is time-classified, and I cannot tell you. Figure it out for yourself."

"Don't palm us off with that chrono-crap," Inskipp growled, deep in his throat, recovered at last. "You say stop the only plan that can save the human race. Sure I say, we'll stop it—if you tell us what else we can do. Or we go ahead as planned."

"It is forbidden to tell."

"Can't you at least hint?" I suggested.

He thought about that for a moment, then smiled. I did not like the look of that smile. "The solution should be obvious to one of your intelligence, diGriz. It's all in the mind."

He hopped into the air, clicked his heels together—and disappeared.

"What did he mean by that?" Inskipp said, scowling with concentration.

What did he mean? It was a clue directed at me so I should be able to solve the riddle. The first part was there to misdirect me I was sure, the bit about my intelligence. *It's all in the mind.* My mind? Whose mind? Was it an idea we had not thought of before? Or was he really talking about minds? I had no idea.

Incuba was looking dreamily into space, thinking deep moral thoughts no doubt. I was beginning to think she was pretty dumb. But not Angelina. That lovely brow was furrowed with thought, for her mind was as high powered as her body. She narrowed her eyes, concentrating—then suddenly widened them. Then smiled. When she caught me looking at her the smile broadened, and she winked. I raised my eyebrows, in an unspoken question, and she nodded back, ever so slightly.

If I were reading the signs correctly all of this nonverbal communication indicated that she had solved the riddle. Having seen recently what real male chauvinist swine were, I was beginning to abandon my claim to that role. If Angelina had the answer I would humbly and with gratitude accept it from her. I leaned closer.

"If you know—tell us," I said. "Credit where credit is due."

"You are maturing as the years pass, aren't you, darling!" She blew me a quick kiss, then raised her voice. "Gentlemen. The answer is obvious."

"Well not to me," Inskipp said.

"It's all in the mind, that's what he said. Which can mean mind control. . . ."

"The gray men!" I shouted. "The Kekkonshiki brain kinkers!"

"I still don't see . . ."

"Because you can see only a physical battle, Inskipp old warrior," I said. "What that time traveling twit was hinting at was an end to the war completely."

"How?"

"By getting the aliens to change their minds. By having them learn to love human beings so they can turn their industrial might to war reparations and make this universe a model for all the others. And who are the master mind changers? None but the Kekkonshiki. They appear to be able to use their psychcontrol techniques on all races."

"And how do you think we can make them do that?" an admiral asked.

"The details will be worked out later," I said, meaning I hadn't the slightest idea at this time. "Order up a battle cruiser, and see that there are plenty of space marines aboard. I am off at once to arrange the salvation of the Galaxy."

"I am not sure about that," Incuba said. "There is a question of morality in mind manipulation . . ." Her words died away and she slumped to the floor.

"Poor thing, she's fainted," Angelina said. "All the stress, you know. I'll take her to her quarters."

Fainted indeed! I had seen my wife in action before. As she spirited the unconscious girl from the room I moved fast, taking advantage of the time she had bought me.

"The battle cruiser! Order it to the spacelock now, for I am going to board her."

"Correct," Inskipp said. "It's on its way." He was aware of the byplay too and just as eager as I was to get the project launched while the Morality Corps observer was accidentally indisposed.

We made a fast and silent trip. For security measures I imposed a radio blackout from repeater stations and told the psiman to accept no messages directed at us. So, when the frigid world of Kekkonshiki appeared on the screens ahead, I still had not been ordered back. And, after giving the subject a good deal of concentration, I knew what had to be done.

"Break radio blackout and contact the landing party we sent to pacify the planet," I ordered.

"They're on now," the operator said. "But they haven't landed. Their ship is still in orbit."

"What's happened?"

"Here's the commander, sir."

An officer with a bandaged head appeared on the screen. He saluted when he saw all the gold braid I was wearing.

"They insist on fighting," he said. "My orders were to pacify the planet, not blow it up. So when all attempts at communication failed I withdrew after neutralizing their spacers."

"They know they can't win."

"You know that and I know that. Now try telling it to those madmen."

It should have been expected. The fatalistic Kekkonshiki would much prefer to die than surrender. In fact, surrender was probably a word that they did not know, a concept alien to their moral philosophy of survival. Yet we needed their help. There was only one person on the planet—hopefully still alive—who could possibly arrange that.

"Has your intelligence staff prepared any maps?" I asked.

"Of course. The usual thing, hypno-scan on prisoners."

"Perfect. Kindly produce one of these maps and put your finger on the Yurisareta School. When you find it—drop me right over it."

Within an hour I had issued all the necessary orders, gathered what equipment I needed, and was floating down in a spacesuit towards the planet below. The gravchute slowed my drop, and the infrared scope let me see clearly through the driving snow. It was late at night, local time, which suited my purpose exactly. I dropped into the deep snow behind the largest building, climbed out of my space gear, and made for the nearest door. It opened into an office where a young man sat behind a desk, reading. He looked up quietly when I came in, placing the sheaf of papers carefully on his desk.

"Who are you?" he asked in an emotionless voice. I answered just as calmly, always trying bluff before violence.

"That is not your concern. This is an important matter. Take me to Hanasu at once."

Surprisingly, it worked. He led me through the drafty building to a heavy door, on which he knocked twice before opening it. Hanasu was a late reader too, merely nodding when I entered and dismissing the other man with a flick of his finger.

"When the invading troops came I knew you had escaped," he said.

"What's been happening?"

"Confusion. No one knew what to do. Some believe if we surrender we will be killed. Others cannot conceive of surrender. The strongest group is led my a man named Kome who believes that only battle is right for us,

even if the fighting ends in all of our deaths. Since this conforms to moral philosophy, most go along with him, although they are uneasy. Nowhere is it written what to do. Therefore Kome's order to fight was obeyed. Everyone understood that. There was no way I could combat him by myself so I have done nothing. I have waited."

"Very wise. But now that I am here there is something very important that you can do."

"What is that?"

"Convince your people here that they must take up alien disguise again and go back and control the aliens."

"I do not understand. You wish them to encourage the war again?"

"No. Quite the opposite. I want them to stop it."

"You must explain. This is beyond me."

"Let me ask you a question first. Could your brain-twisting machines be used on the aliens? To convince them that human beings are really very nice after all? We do have damp eyeballs and sweat a lot. Fingers aren't too different from tentacles when you think about it. Could this be done?"

"Very easily. You must understand that the aliens come from primitive cultures and are easily led. When we began infiltrating them to organize the invasion we were faced with indifference at first. To overcome this the leaders were treated and taught to hate humans. Then, through propaganda, they convinced the rest of the populations. It took a long time, but that is the way it was done."

"Can the indoctrination process be reversed?"

"I would think so. But how can you convince my people to do a thing like this?"

"That is the big question I was coming to." I stood and paced the room, marshaling my thoughts. "What is to be done must be done through the teachings of moral philosophy as you practice it here. You have a vital culture, an important one that contains elements that should benefit all of mankind. It was just misapplied when it left the surface of this planet. Is there anything inherent in moral philosophy that says you must be galaxy conquerors?"

"No. We learned to hate those who abandoned us on this world because we must always believe that they will never come back to save us. We must save ourselves. Survival is the beginning and the end. Anything that goes against that is wrong."

"Then Kome and his talk of racial suicide is wrong!"

For a Kekkonshiki, Hanasu looked almost startled. "Of course! His preachings go against the law. All must be told."

"Let's set it up. We must be sure that Kome doesn't shoot first and debate later. If we keep him quiet, do you think that you can convince the troops?"

"There is no doubt. None will dare disagree with what I say for I will explain the law as it is written, as it is taught, as they have learned since they were small boys like the ones here."

As though right on cue these same small boys burst the door open. There were a lot of them there, filling the doorway, all heavily armed, led by the man who had let me in, who now pointed his gun directly at me.

"Put down your weapon," he ordered. "I will shoot and kill if you do not."

XVI.

Of course my gun was pointing at the pack; my reflexes are still in good shape. I had drawn and crouched automatically as the door had crunched. Now I rose slowly and let the gun drop to my side. I was seriously outgunned, by deadly weapons held by nervous boys.

"Don't shoot, you've got me cold!" I called out.

"What is the meaning of this?" Hanasu asked, standing and walking towards the door. "Lower those weapons. This is an order."

The boys obeyed instantly—they knew who the Headmaster was—but the man wavered. "Kome has said . . ."

"Kome is not here. Kome is wrong. I order you for the last time to put that weapon down." The teacher hesitated for an instant too long and Hanasu turned to me. "Shoot him," he ordered.

Of course I did, and he thudded to the floor. With a sleep needle of course, though the boys did not have to know that. And I doubted if Hanasu cared. He was not used to his orders being disobeyed. "Hand me that gun," he ordered the nearest boy. "And call an assembly of the entire school at once."

They handed over the guns and instantly left. Hanasu closed the door, deep in thought.

"Here is what we will do," he finally said. "I will explain the differences to everyone in terms of moral philosophy. They have been troubled with internal conflicts over the application, and this problem will now be resolved. After they have understood, we will march on the spaceport. Kome and his activists are there.

I will explain again, and they will join us. Then you will call your ship down, and we will proceed to the second part of the program."

"That all sounds very good. But what if they don't agree with you?"

"They will have to, because it is not me they are agreeing with but the text of moral philosophy as it is written. Once they understand, it will not be a matter of choice or agreement but of obedience."

He sounded very sure of himself so I crossed my fingers behind his back and hoped that he was right.

"Maybe I should come with you. In case of trouble?"

"You will wait here until you are summoned."

Hanasu exited on that line, and I could do nothing other than let him go. I unlimbered my radio and contacted my ships to put them into the picture. They would stand by in orbit above the spaceport and await further orders. I broke the connection when there was a knock on the door.

"Come with me," a stern-faced little boy ordered. I obeyed. Hanasu was waiting by the open front door of the school while boys and teachers streamed by him on both sides.

"We go to the spaceport," he said. "We will reach it at dawn."

"No problems?"

"Of course not. I could tell that they were relieved to have this conflict over interpretation of the rulings of moral philosophy made clear to them. My people are strong, but they get their strength from obedience. Now they are stronger still."

Hanasu drove the only car in the procession, and I was glad to travel with him. The rest of the staff and the students slogged along on skis. Uncomplainingly, despite the fact they had all been sound asleep less than an hour before. There is a lot to be said for discipline. There is nothing to be said for the comfort of Kekkonshiki groundcars. Dawn was lighting up the first snowstorm of the morning as we reached the spaceport entrance. Two guards emerged from the shack and looked stolidly at the car and following skiers as though this happened every day.

"Tell Kome I am here to see him," Hanasu ordered.

"None are permitted in. Kome has ordered. All enemy are to be killed. That is an enemy in your car. Kill him."

Hanasu's voice was cold as the grave, although it rang with authority.

"The Fourteenth Rule of Obedience states you will obey the orders of one of the Ten. I have given you an order. There is no rule that there are enemies to be killed. Stand aside."

A trace of emotion almost touched the guard's face, then was gone. He stepped back. "Proceed," he said. "Kome will be informed."

In line now, our juvenile and senile invading force swept across the spaceport towards the administration buildings. We passed antiaircraft emplacements, but the men manning them only looked on and made no attempt to stop us. It was gray, chill dawn now, with sudden snow flurries blasting by. Our car stopped in front of the entrance to administration; and Hanasu had just climbed, creaking, down when the door opened. I stayed in the car and tried to look invisible. Kome and a dozen followers emerged, all carrying guns.

It must have been the cold that was chilling my brain because I realized, for the first time, that I was the only one in our party who was armed.

"Go back to your school, Hanasu. You are not wanted here," Kome shouted, getting in the first word. Hanasu ignored him, walking forward until he was face to face with the other man. When he spoke he spoke loudly so all could hear.

"I tell you all to put your guns away for what you are doing is against the rule of moral philosophy. By that rule we must lead the weak races. By that rule we must not commit suicide by fighting all the other races who outnumber us millions to one. If we fight them as we are doing now we will all be killed. You must . . ."

"You must get out of here," Kome called out. "It is you who break the rule. Go or be killed." He raised his gun and pointed it. I slipped out of the door of the car.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," I said, my own gun pointing.

"You bring an alien here!" Kome's voice was loud, almost angry. "He will be killed, you will be killed. . . ."

His voice broke off and there was a loud crack as Hanasu stepped forward and slapped him hard across the face.

"You are proscribed," Hanasu said, and there was a gasp of indrawn breath from all the watchers. "You have disobeyed. You are ended."

"Ended? Not me, you!" Kome cracked, his voice roaring with rage, whipping up his gun.

I dived to the side, trying for a shot, but Hanasu was in the way. There was the crackling roar of gunfire.

Yet Hanasu still stood there, unmoving, as Kome's ragged body fell to the ground. All of his followers had fired at him at the same time. The rule of Kekkonshiki moral philosophy had destroyed him. Calm and undisturbed, Hanasu turned to all those present and explained his newly discovered interpretation of the Law. They tried not to show expression, but it was obvious that they were relieved. There was solidity in their lives again, structure and order. Kome's huddled body was the only evidence that there had ever been a schism, and—from the way they stood—they obviously did not see it nor want to look at it. Order had returned.

"You can come down now," I ordered into my radio.

"Negative. Priority override orders."

"Negative!" I shouted into the microphone. "What are you talking about. Get those crates down here instantly or I'll fry your commander and eat him for lunch."

"Negative. Order issuing vessel on way ETA three minutes."

The connection was broken and I could only stare, popeyed, at the radio. What development was this? More and more men were coming up and listening to Hanasu. The situation was well in hand, a solution possible—and I got more troubles. A slim scoutship dropped down through the snowstorms, and I was at the port when it swung open. Fire in my eye and my fingers twitching millimeters from my gunbutt. A familiar and loathsome form stepped out.

"You!" I cried.

"Yes, it is I, and just in time to prevent a miscarriage of moral justice."

It was Jay Hovah, boss of the Morality Corps. And I had more than a strong suspicion why he was here.

"You're not needed here," I said. "Nor are you dressed for the weather. I suggest you get back inside."

"Morality comes first," he shivered, for no one had told him about the climate and he was wearing just his usual bathrobe outfit.

"I tried talking to him, but he would not listen," an even more familiar voice said, and Angelina emerged from behind him.

"Darling!" I called out and we had a quick embrace then drew away as Jay Hovah's voice came between us.

"It is my understanding that your mission here is to convince these people to use psychcontrol techniques on the aliens so we can win the war. These techniques are immoral and will not be used."

"Who is this who comes here?" Hanasu asked in his coldest voice.

"His name is Jay," I said. "In charge of our Morality Corps. He makes sure that we don't do things that violate our own moral codes."

Hanasu looked him up and down like some specimen of vermin, then turned away and faced me. "I have seen him," he said. "You may now take him away. Have your ships land so the operation against the aliens can begin."

"I don't think you heard me," Jay Hovah said through chattering teeth. "This operation is forbidden. It is immoral."

Hanasu turned slowly to face him and impaled him with an arctic stare. "You do not talk to me of immorality. I am a Leader in moral philosophy and I interpret the Law. What we did to the aliens to start this war was a mistake. We will now utilize the same techniques to stop it."

"No! Two wrongs do not make a right. It is forbidden."

"You cannot stop us for you have no authority here. You can only order us killed to stop us. If we are not killed we will do what must be done as ordered by our own moral code."

"You will be stopped. . . ."

"Only by death. If you cannot order us killed, remove yourself and your interference."

Hanasu turned his back and walked away. Jay moved his jaw a few times, but had trouble talking. He was also turning blue. I waved two of the schoolboys over.

"Here, lads. Help this poor old man back into his ship so he can warm up and consider the old philosophical problem of an irresistible force meeting an immobile object."

Jay tried to protest, but they gave him a firm clutch and frogmarched him back aboard.

"What happens now?" Angelina asked.

"The Kekkonshiki are unleashed and go out and try to win the war. There is no way that the Morality Corps can find justification for killing them in order to stop them from saving us. I think that will be a little too much hair-splitting even for Jay and Incuba. He can maybe order us not to give aid to the Kekkonshiki, but will probably have a hard time justifying even that."

"I'm sure that you are right. Then what is next?"

"Next? Why, saving the Galaxy, of course. Again."

"That's my ever-modest husband," she said, but tempered her admonitory words by kissing me soundly.

XVII.

"That really looks impressive, don't you think?" I asked.

"I think it looks disgusting," Angelina said, wrinkling her nose. "Not only that, they stink."

"An improvement over the first model. Remember, where we are going, anything bad must be good."

In a way Angelina was right. It did look disgusting. Which was good, very good. We stood at the front of the main cabin of the spaceliner we had commandeered for this job. Before us stretched row after row of heavy chairs, almost 500 in all. And in each chair there crouched, or flopped, or oozed, a singularly repulsive alien. Something to gladden the eyestalks of the enemy I was sure, for all of these had been patterned after my first alien disguise. More of the same race, the Geshtunken. What would not have gladdened the multiple hearts and plasma pumps of the enemy, if they had known, was the fact that each of these aliens held a solemn-faced Kekkonshiki, while built into each thrashing tail was a high powered synaptic generator. Our crusade for peace had begun.

Not that organizing it had been easy. The Morality Corps was still resolutely set against our brain-twisting the enemy. But their authority worked through planetary governments and the heads of staff. For once I blessed the complex tangle of bureaucratic tanglement. While orders were issued and routed, a few of us in the Special Corps launched a rush program to circumvent the orders before we received them. Key technicians were whisked away and their destination lost in the files. A protesting Prof. Coypu was ripped from his midnight bed and found himself in deep space before he had put his socks on. A certain highly automated manufacturing planet had been co-opted by our agents, and the Kekkonshiki volunteers were spacelifted there. While the alien disguises were being fabricated, Hanasu headed the programming team of psychcontrol technicians. We had barely succeeded in time, finally blasting off short hours ahead of the battleship that Morality Corps had dispatched to stop us. In the end this aided instead of hurting since we zipped up to the alien fleet with the battleship belting along after us. A few barrages from the spacewhales had it turning tail.

"We're within communication distance now," I announced. "Are you ready for your work, Kekkonshiki volunteers?"

"We are ready," came the loud but unemotional response.

"Good luck, then. On suits, my crew."

I climbed into my alien outfit, and Angelina got into hers. James was in one robot disguise, Bolivar in the other. They waved, then clanged the tops shut. I zipped my neck and turned on the communicator.

"My darling Sleepery Jeem returned from the grave!" a repulsive thing with claws and tentacles rattled and gurgled at me from the screen.

"I do not know you, ugly sir," I simpered. "But you must have made the acquaintance of my twin. I am her sister, Sleepery Bolivar." I actuated the trigger that released a large and oily tear that trickled down my lengthened eyelashes and splashed to the deck. "Back on Geshtunken we heard of her noble death. We have come for vengeance!"

"Welcome, welcome," the thing gurgled and writhed. "I am Sess-Pule, the new commander of all the forces. Join me at once and we will have great stinking banquet!"

I did as ordered, joining our ships and rolling to his rotten welcome with Angelina at my side. I had to sidestep neatly to avoid Sess's wet embrace and he squashed to the deck instead.

"Meet Ann-Geel, my chief of staff. These little robots bring gifts of food and drink which we will now consume."

The party rolled into high gear at once, and more and more of the ship's officers came to join us until I wondered who was flying the thing. Probably no one. "How goes the war?" I asked.

"Terrible!" Sess moaned, draining a flagon of something green and bubbly. "Oh, we have the alien crunchies on the run all right, but they won't stop and fight. Morale runs low since all of our soldiers are fed up with war and want only to return to the sticky embraces of their loved things. But the war must go on. I think."

"Help is on the way," I cried, slapping him on the back, then wiping off my hand on the rug. "My ship is filled with blood-thirsty volunteers all lusting for war and victory and vengeance. In addition to being great fighters and having good senses of smell, my troops are great navigators and fire control officers, watch-keeping officers and cooks."

"By Slime-Gog we can use them!" Sess gurgled aloud. "Do you have many troops with you?"

"Well," I said coyly. "We might just have enough to spare one for each of your

battleships, and each battleship can lead a fleet, and if the officers of the fleet want advice or morale boosting they are welcome to talk to my people who work night and day and are sexy to boot."

"We are saved!" he screamed.

Or lost, I thought to myself, smiling toothily at the disgusting revelry on all sides. I wondered how long it would take for my brainscrambling saboteurs to get the job done.

Not long, not long at all. Since the aliens had had to be convinced to go to war in the first place, were fed up in the second place, they were ripe for subversion in the third place. The rot spread and it was only a few days later that Sess-Pule slithered up to me in the navigation room where I was making sure, by rotten navigation, that we didn't catch up with the fleeing human fleet. He looked gloomily at the scream with a halfdozen bloodshot eyestalks.

"Not sleeping too well lately?" I asked, flicking one of his ruddy orbs with a claw. He sucked it back in unhappily.

"You can say that again, bold Woleevar. It is all too depressing; the fleet seems to be getting away, back in my home hive last year's crop of virgins will be approaching estrus. I keep asking myself what I am doing here."

"What are you doing here?"

"I don't know. My heart has gone out of this war."

"Funny. I was thinking the same thing last night. Have you noticed that the aliens really aren't too crunchy? They have damp eyes and nasty looking wet red things in their mouths."

"You're right!" he slobbered. "I never thought of that before. What can we possibly do?"

"Well . . ." I said, and for all apparent purposes that was that. Ten hours later, after a lot of radioing back and forth among the ships, the mightiest fighting armada the Galaxy had ever seen was cutting a great arc in space. Turning, reversing, going back to the creepy places from whence they had come.

In the drunken party that evening that celebrated the victorious end of the war—they had rationalized it that way with some help—I and Angelina clutched claws and looked around at the disgusting sights on all sides.

"They are really sort of sweet when you get used to them," she said.

"I wouldn't go quite as far as to say that. But they are rather harmless once they abandon all the war plans."

"Rich, too," the James robot said, pouring something nasty into my glass.

We have been doing a little investigating," Bolivar said, rolling up on the other side. "In their various operations they have captured ships and planets and satellites. They emptied all the bank vaults since they knew that we valued their contents, though they didn't know why. They do not have money as we have it."

"I know," I said. "They have the Eckh Unit, which is best left undescribed."

"Right, Dad," James said. "So when they raided all the treasuries they sent the stuff here to the command battleship hoping something would figure out what to do with it. What they did do with it was to store it all in one of the holds."

"Let me guess," Angelina said. "The hold is now empty?"

"You're always right, Mom. And the transport ship is sort of full."

"We'll have to return the loot to the sources from whence it came," I said, and was pleased at the two shocked robotic looks and one alien stare of despair.

"Jim . . . !" Angelina gasped.

"Do not worry. I have all my senses. I mean we'll have to return the alien loot that we found . . ."

". . . but we didn't recover very much." She finished the sentence for me.

Something heavy, greenish-brown, tentacled, and clawed squashed down noisily next to me.

"To victory!" Sess-Pule shouted. "We must drink to victory! Silence, everyone, silence, while the pulchritudinous Sleepery proposes a toast."

"I shall!" I shouted, jumping to my feet, aware of the sudden silence and the fact that every eyepad, eyestalk, optic tentacle, not to mention six human eyeballs, was fixed upon me.

"A toast," I called out, raising my glass on high so enthusiastically that some of the drink slopped out and burned a hole in the carpet.

"A toast to all the creatures that live in our universe, large and small, solid and sloppy. May peace and love be their lot forever more. Here's to life, liberty—and the opposite sex!"

And thus we rushed down the light years towards a far, far better future.

I hope.

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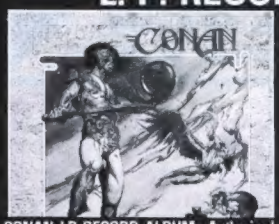

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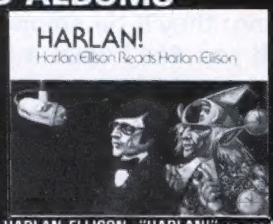

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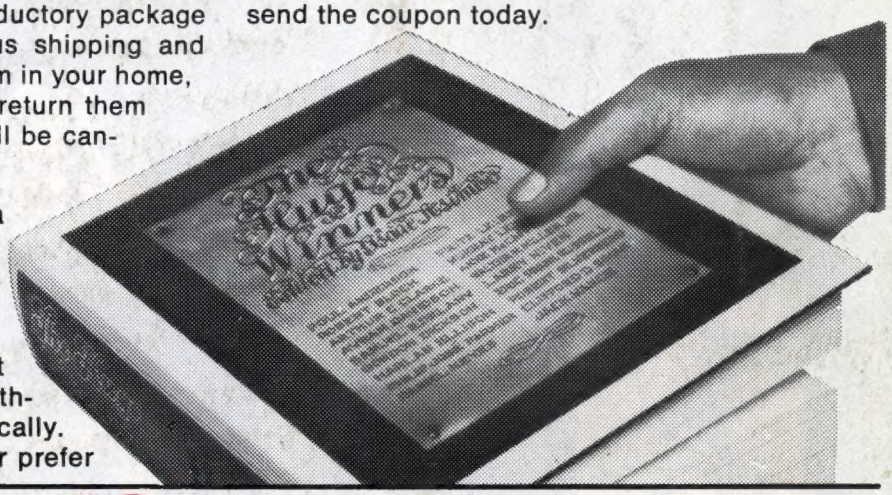

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